John Waters: Camp, Abjection and the Grotesque Body

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ABSTRACT

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John Waters: Camp, Abjection and the Grotesque Body

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Camp is a style of art that is closely tied in with Queer Theory; both topics are of great importance in understanding John Waters’ contribution to both the art world and the gay community. His work sexualizes the unsavory, glorifies the abject, yet it is done in such a manner that laughter ensues. This is a product of camp art, which explained by Susan Sontag in her article “Notes on Camp”, “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful and anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.” I’m interested in using the Camp theme along with Julia Kristeva’s work with the abject and Queer Theory to delve deeper into the artistic style of John Waters. Much like the content of his films, his artworks play into that frivolous side of the serious, he accentuates the frivolous by his inclusion of the abject finding something artistic and beautiful in the least desirable of locales.

John Waters is best known for his accomplishments as a filmmaker and director in films that just push the envelope far enough to upset many people’s idea of normality by likening the absurd to the normal, treating the normal in turn as Other. He accomplishes this through the medium of Camp, which he continued to utilize in his art making and collecting. Following in the footsteps of Andy Warhol, he applies similar tactics in finding desirability in persons and items not readily associated with beauty per
se. The photographic still; *12 Assholes and a Dirty Foot*, along with his films *Pink Flamingos* and *Pecker* showcase his interests while the city of Baltimore provides the backdrop for his work and remains the thread that ties his work together.

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CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

In order to understand the nature of John Waters’ films and artworks, one must first define the methodologies that he utilizes in their production. Camp, the abject and the use of the grotesque body are the three main components employed by John Waters to address the presence of “peripheral sexualities.” Waters’ situates his undesirables in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, and while it can be said that “home is where the heart is” for Waters “home is where the art is.” The city of Baltimore, Maryland is unique due to its central placement within the arsenal of works created by John Waters.

Camp, as an art construct was still in its infancy in the early 1960s, when the teenage John Waters began to venture into the world of filmmaking. Susan Sontag is important to the discussion of camp due to the fact that she was the first theorist to attempt to define the fledgling artform. At the time she was writing her essay “Notes on Camp”, Pop-Art was new and not yet solidified within the canons of Art History. Artists such as Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein were drawing their inspiration from certain avenues of popular American culture, of which entertainment media and consumerism were at the forefront. Art culture was venturing out of the realm of the elite, and beginning to appeal to the average consumer. This transition is best visualized in the career of Andy Warhol. Warhol had begun his career as an advertisement artist, but by the early 1960s he was painting Campbell’s soup cans. Warhol took an ordinary pantry item, one that most American families had in stock, and reproduced and multiplied it on canvas. He was making a statement on consumerism, and widening his audience base by being able to appeal to the lower classes. I doubt this would’ve happened if he had
painted caviar. Pop-Art was really nothing more than a marketing ploy, albeit a brilliant one. Camp art, however, is entirely situated within the lower classes. Sontag, like many of her contemporaries, saw Camp as being synonymous to kitsch, both of which were seen as objects that lent a hand in the perceived death of art. This “conflation of Camp with kitsch and schlock, is a confusion that entered the discourse as a result of the heterosexual/Pop colonization of Camp in the 1960’s.” This was the movement in New York, so how does it apply to Baltimore. Baltimore is unique, according to Waters’ because it does not fall prey to the East and West Coast fads, its appeal is highly original.

When Sontag defined Camp as ‘apolitical,’ a sentiment that has been challenged by many of her successors, she was not aware of the political agenda of camp within homosexual communities. According to Moe Meyer, “Sontag killed off the binding referent of Camp-the Homosexual-and the discourse began to unravel as Camp became confused and conflated with rhetorical and performative strategies such as irony, satire, burlesque, and travesty; and with cultural movements such as Pop.” Even though Sontag has been accused of removing the homosexual from camp, she did acknowledge the importance of their presence in the movement due to fact that she referred to Camp as the “solvent of homosexuality.” Baltimore has a prominent gay community, and ties to Gay Rights History due to the fact that the Pepper Hill Club, a gay club, located ironically enough on Gay Street was raided on October 2, 1955, where 162 arrests were made. This raid occurred 14 years prior to Stonewall in New York. The young John
Waters was only 9 years old when this raid occurred, what kind of influence would that produce in a young child, even one with a gay sensibility.

Jack Babuscio argued in his essay *Camp and the Gay Sensibility* that one needed a Gay Sensibility in order to understand the style of Camp. He defined the gay sensibility as:

- a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream;
- a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression;
- in short, a perception of the world that is colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one’s gayness.  

Camp as a style is typically divided into two categories, High Camp and Low Camp, and within these two categories there are four main features to camp that are present. Although, there are two categories, the focus of my argument revolves around Low Camp, and its importance in the career and works of John Waters. According to Babuscio’s essay *Camp and the Gay Sensibility*, there are four fundamental features to camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor. Waters maintains a strict adherence to the four fundamental features of camp, incorporating each in various guises throughout his extensive film catalog. Two of his films *Pink Flamingos* and *Pecker* are outlined in the following chapters. Low Camp is identifiable through the visibility of homosexuality in the lower classes, of which the drag queen is the most prominent feature. The inclusion of the drag queen is necessary when discussing the career of John Waters due to his relationship, both personal and cinematic, with Divine.

No “real” man will allow himself to express fear of another man dressed in women’s clothing. For most heterosexuals, the drag artist is the least threatening and most visible part of gay subculture, and consequently the first element of gay social practice that straight people are willing to confront, probably because they can feel superior to it.
In the Introduction of *Camp Grounds* Marty Roth was quoted as saying, “From the very beginning transvestism and drag were the epitome of Low Camp. Indeed, if the word *camp* is drawn from the French *camper*, to pose, to strike an attitude, then the drag performance is the essential act of camp.”

Camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humor, and theatricality allows us to witness “serious” issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed. The “serious” is in fact crucial to camp. Though camp mocks the solemnities of our culture, it never totally discards the seriousness of a thing or individual.

It is for this reason that camp imagery is most closely associated with the gay community, especially female impersonators whose flamboyant and often ridiculous dress and behavior act as a comic or dramatic barrier against ignorant prejudice. This particular example is the tame, palatable version seen in nightclubs, the kind where even the most crotchety of grandparents would find some amusement. There is, after all, nothing too frightening about a drag queen, unless that drag queen is Divine, in a blue sequin gown crooning *Blue Angel* to an apprehensive martini swilling crowd. These drag queens were glamorous, emulating their looks after such classic Hollywood icons as Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich and Judy Garland, and surprisingly enough were able to successfully parody women. The gender incongruities of drag queens add to their performance on stage. Drag performances are typically either glamorous or comic; this is often dependent on the age and experience of the performer. Glamorous drag queens tend to be the older, more experienced of the performers, even though glamour drag is the most sought out position within the realm of drag performance. Young men seeking out their place on stage tend to audition in glamour drag, but manner of style and voice are not as
developed as those of seasoned performers, and they often get placed in the role of comic. Comic drag is probably the closest in relation to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. Drag performers, like performers during Carnival, play with gender role reversal, which due to their high visibility within mainstream culture allows them this cathartic exercise without stigmatization.

Drag in these circumstances provided a cathartic outlet for gay men without being ostracized, by the rest of their male comrades. Jack Babuscio wrote in *Camp and the Gay Sensibility*, that “laughter, rather than tears, is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society.”\(^{14}\) This painful incongruity between gay culture and mainstream culture is precisely where Camp thrives, Camp needs the painfully serious in order to make fun out of it.\(^{15}\) That is also why when talking about the seriousness that underlies Low Camp, Babuscio refers to the term bitter-wit. This making fun out of the serious, laughing instead of crying, provides a cathartic social outlet much like Bakhtin’s Carnival; however they are not synonymous terms.

The carnivalesque is always visible, an open provocation of the dominant culture; while camp frequently separates gay culture from straight culture. Bakhtin also places stress on the literally reproductive aspects of the carnivalesque:\(^{16}\) ‘one of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body or at least a body ready for conception and fertilization, the stress being laid on the phallus or genital organs. From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other.’\(^{17}\)

Comic drag performers also play on the theme of pregnancy, the most obvious representation of two bodies existing as one; however this parodying of pregnancy is often grossly exaggerated adding emphasis to the comic nature of the drag show. Camp,
however, often depicts reproduction as one of the aspects of heterosexual society that must be inverted.”

The issue of pregnancy, or rather motherhood, is relevant to my discussion on John Waters’, because like every other valued vestige of American culture, he parodied the concept of motherhood. “For if the folk grotesque pits the social against the natural, camp pits both nature and society against art.”

Camp and carnivalesque occupy many of the same cultural positions. For example, Bakhtin argues that the carnivalesque has three basic forms: the ritual spectacle, comic verbal composition, and various forms of abuse such as curses and oaths. Camp takes such equivalent forms as the drag show, the queeny repartee, and the gay put-down. Like the carnivalesque, it merges the sublimely grand with the earthly ridiculous.

Returning to the notion that drag is a cathartic outlet that is readily accepted throughout mainstream culture opens the door to abjection, which exists in tandem to catharsis. The term abject literally refers to the lowest of the low. For example, abject poverty refers to those people who live below the poverty line, the poorest of the poor. Even though the term abject is applicable in relation to Low Camp and the Middle to Low Classes of society, abjection in Kristevaian terms refers to the body, and things ejected from the body. To define catharsis in a way that readily shows the connectivity of the two terms, one must look at the psychoanalytic definition of catharsis: the relief of tension and anxiety by bringing repressed feelings and fears to consciousness. Julia Kristeva defines this relationship as being:

Without for that matter biologizing language, and while breaking away from identification by means of interpretation, analytic speech is one that becomes “incarnate” in the full sense of the term. On that condition only, it is “cathartic”—meaning thereby that it is the equivalent, for the analyst as well as the analysand, not of purification but of rebirth with and against abjection.
The pregnant body is once again a worthy example to use. Not only is there the two bodies in one, but one is dying as the other lives, Kristeva writes of the self giving birth to self, and the corpse as ‘the most sickening of wastes’ in a manner of which their relationship to one another is evident.

“I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjunct.

Within one body we can see how the two terms rely on one another to produce the border of the body that the abject exists beyond. Kristeva later goes on to describe the maternal form as the place where the two defilements of anal eroticism or the fear of castration stem from due to the fact that the maternal/feminine form is the place where filth and pollution flow. Kristeva states in *Powers of Horror* that, “Polluting objects fall, schematically in two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to the borders of the body, have any polluting value.”

How then does the abject relate to the homosexual? The abject is an anal dirtiness that fixates, a brand of societal filth that can be linked back to the maternal body, from which the anal phallus is invisible, yet it is a natural phenomenon that all males grow from, and exist within. It is as natural as the Oedipal Complex, when the mother’s absent phallus is realized and breeds into young boys the fear of castration. The recognition of phallic body and the absence of the mother’s phallus can lead to the ultimate recognition of self in other phallic bodies, in which the homosexual male emerges. The female body is that
of the Other, not male, and the home of the pollutions that flow from the body, recognized by the son as Other than him. He then seeks out bodies that exist in the same manner as his, thereby foregoing his initial infantile fear of castration, and cleansing himself of the pollutants of the mother’s body. Bakhtin wrote of a similar abject pollution in *Rabelais*: “We must not forget that urine (as well as dung) is gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter.”

This statement can be visualized in the comic drag queen, who in understanding the incongruities of ‘her’ stature can parody the situation and provide a cathartic outlet in laughter. By providing this outlet the comic drag queen overcomes the apprehension of that martini swilling crowd through the vehicle of laughter. Bakhtin said it best when he wrote “Terror is conquered by laughter.”

Fear of the Other is released in a large, congregational guffaw. Returning to the former Bakhtin statement about dung being able to degrade and relieve, this is a great example of the relationship between abjection and catharsis, and this degradation and relief can explain the move away from the pollutants of the mother’s body.

The stigma of maternal incest is another contribution to the homosexual male finding solace in the familiar form of other men. Maternal incest is not only a societal taboo, but also a psychological taboo in that it equates maternal incest with castration. Then in a huge stretch the fear of maternal incest turns into a fear of all women as an Other, linking all women together as a group whose bodies devoid of phallus, are the communal takers of the phallus. This reinforced fear of castration creates a fraternal bond, linking men as common bodies together ultimately segregating the phallus-havers.
from the phallus-takers. This assumption is taken to the extreme, not all infantile castration fears transcend into fears of castration in adulthood. Besides the pollutants that they are seeking to repel, also exist within their own bodies, as they were at one time the same body. With this image of the two bodies in one we return to grotesque body in Bakhtin.

The grotesque body fits comfortably within a niche created through Low Camp and the Carnivalesque. The grotesque form of female impersonators relies heavily on their long-standing visibility within mainstream culture, in which the grotesque is “first of all a caricature but a caricature that has reached fantastic dimensions.” Bakhtin describes the grotesque as an exaggeration, or a caricature of the negative, the inappropriate. The female grotesque of the drag queen is a prime example of the exaggeration that Bakhtin referred to in the topographical nature of the carnivalesque; which puts the focus on the lower stratum of the body. The masquerade provided in drag, disguises men as women then draws attention to the lower body; wherein the ability to reproduce is nullified. Comic drag is the best example of this focus on the lower body as a focal point of regeneration and death, the pregnant woman/man in drag pretending to be pregnant is purely an exaggeration of the body, of organs that he does not possess, and an act that he cannot fulfill. The comic act of pregnancy, two bodies in one is still applicable, but it is based in the constructs of gender; men that identify with the feminine gender, and dress as such exemplifies this two body framework of the masculine and the feminine in one body. A phallic body inverted by the use of disguise, a mask of heavy makeup obscures the true nature of this inverted body. This borderline body of the
transvestite exists as something not entirely masculine or feminine, but a combination of both genders.

Here it is possible to look back at Kristeva’s recognition of the abject that exists/comes into being only outside the borders of the body, the pregnant man is confined to his body, and there is no feasible way to eject the being within, but the pregnant man/woman supplies this body with an outlet from which the ‘child’ is spawned. The mask of drag performance allows the performers to transcend the natural boundaries of the body, the body acts as a chrysalis from which this new inverted body can emerge and be seen. Bakhtin breeched this topic of the reinvented body when he wrote:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with a gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames.32

When Bakhtin writes of gay matters, it is most likely in its classical definition which means joyous or festive, and not in the way that we recognize the term today, however it seemlessly transcends this divided definition encompassing both meanings. The carnival images produced in Rabelais, and the focus on the marketplace where the grotesque body as spectacle exists, is very similar in nature to the gay subculture in the realm of Low Camp.

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms namely the spectacle. In turn, medieval spectacles often tended toward carnival folk culture, the culture of the marketplace, and to a certain extent became one of its components. But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs
to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.\textsuperscript{33}

He explains that the grotesque form exists on the border of art and life. How does this border between art and life affect the spectacle of the drag show? Drag exists in the communal homosexual subculture, where the carnivalesque nature of the queens is lived rather than acted, the performative nature of drag then is essential to their gender identification. Bakhtin claims that, “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live it, and everyone participates because it’s very idea embraces all the people.”\textsuperscript{34} If everyone participates in carnival, then there is no distinction between stage and audience, and herein lays the anomaly of drag as spectacle, our martini swilling crowd having lost their former apprehension now cheer on the performers, but they are still separated by the stage, they are not on the same plane. Drag performers, both glamorous and comic exist on the stage, they perform a certain feminine gender, inverting their male bodies, and producing in them the border between life and art. They are thus reinventing their bodies through the symbols of the carnival, through their performance of the feminine; Bakhtin states that “all the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of a gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’, of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.”\textsuperscript{35} The ‘turnabout’ move from the underground that led to the high-visibility of the drag queen in mainstream culture, they no longer live on the border because their performance is now art, the laughter created is now with the performers not at them. Their performance is not
one of comic proportions, Bakhtin described it as such, “They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors.”

Their high-visibility in the mainstream acts as the marketplace carnival, in which laughter of the masses aides in their simultaneous denial and renewal of form, “Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding.”

Her performance is one of extreme exaggeration: the drag queen on stage is both the performer of the act and the performer of the female gender. Their dress is their bodily disguise, and the mask of makeup, hiding prickly remnants of stubble which exaggerates the nature of their gender reversal. Mary Russo wrote in *The Female Grotesque* that, “the masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society.”

The grotesque exists in ones mask, the disguise of the drag queen reveals in this gender role reversal the essence of the grotesque. The feminine grotesque of the drag queen is revealed in the mask. What is very interesting about the drag queen is not the fact that gender is being performed, but how it is being performed. It is within these constructs that camp plays a significant role in the image of the drag queen; these men are not interested in ‘passing’ as female, meaning that they willfully try to appropriate feminine behavior and can effectively ‘pass’ as the other gender, but instead they exaggerate the
serious nature of the feminine to its most frivolous ends. “This femininity,” according to Russo, “is a mask which masks nonidentity.”40 Creating what Russo referred to as, “the female sexuality as masquerade,” identities hidden beneath a mask of costume makeup, the drag queen masquerades as the feminine.41

Within these three methodologies we can draw a connection between camp and the grotesque performance of the drag queen. This connection is useful in dealing with the usage of drag in the films of John Waters, where childhood friend Divine redefined the feminine grotesque body, ab-jectifying this body with extreme exaggeration all the while parodying glamour. Waters’ finds glamour in persons and things that many would define as unglamorous, finding and extracting beauty in the most unlikely of places, for instance the grotesque performitivity of the drag queen, who both hides and flaunts the disguised body.
CHAPTER 2: PINK FLAMINGOS AND DRAG QUEENS

John Waters is known for his ability to pervert cherished institutions, such as religion, domesticity, glamour and fame, into mockeries of themselves using abject humor and camp parody. These themes are all pressed into service of the larger themes of class division, race relations, suburbia, the family unit and sexual preference. The director was inspired to create Pink Flamingos while driving to California with David Lochary in 1970. He looked to his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland for inspiration. He set his 1972 film Pink Flamingos outside his hometown, and employed his friends as actors. His friends included Mink Stole, Mary Vivian Pearce, David Lochary and his childhood neighbor, friend and muse Divine born Glenn Milstead. Together they comprised a motley crew of individuals each with their own penchant for crime and deviancy. Waters managed to merge trailer trash with glamour effectively blurring the division of the classes. He brought about a higher recognition of drag queens and the gay community by including these elements within the constraints of the typical family unit.

Pink Flamingos, encompassed the themes of domestic life, glamour and fame, yet it was crude, obscene and a true exercise in bad taste. Divine plays herself, an exiled trash diva, hiding out in the woods under the alias Babs Johnson. She is joined by her infantile mother Edie, played by Edith Massey, a Baltimore bartender; her partner Cotton, played by Mary Vivian Pearce, a childhood friend of Waters’; and her son Crackers, played by Danny Mills. The film starts off with Waters’ announcing over the radio, that the “Filthiest Person Alive” is wanted for an extensive list of criminal violations including prostitution and murder. Her criminal notoriety forced the family to go on the lam in the
small rural town of Phoenix, Maryland, which is located north of Baltimore. The camera pans out to show an aluminum sided trailer with pink flamingos in the yard. Behind the trailer we see Crackers’ abode, a shed near the chicken coop, a fact that will be important later in the film. Divine’s mother Edie occupies a playpen in the corner of the trailer, where she sits day in and day out in her underwear, waiting for the eggman, Paul Swift, to arrive. Cotton, Divine’s self-proclaimed partner, best depicts the glamorous ideal of femininity. However, her look of normalcy cannot hide her voyeuristic impulses; she enjoys watching Crackers’ random hookups. The knowing Crackers willingly performs for his audience, going so far as to inform Cotton of his plans prior to the act.

The plot is driven by the extreme behaviors of two families who both desperately desire public recognition.45 It was a feud for fame between Divine/Babs Johnson, and Raymond and Connie Marble. With this issue of fame, Waters was testing the limits of people. How far would someone go to get their fifteen minutes of fame? Would they kill for it? The criminality of fame is constantly changing, and each crime begets another fouler crime and continues in this fashion. Which makes one wonder, where is the line? Has it already been crossed? If so what pushed it? I want to discuss the ways in which Waters uses the abject to parody the underlining themes of domestic life, glamour and fame in this film. What is the bigger picture here? What issue or issues is he addressing? And why does it matter?

Back in Baltimore, the Marbles are vying for the coveted title of “Filthiest People Alive.” Raymond and Connie Marble, played by David Lochary and Mink Stole respectively, are both friends of Waters. Divine’s counterpart, Connie Marble, is also
unconventionally glamorous. When first seen in the film, she is wearing rhinestone studded horn-rimmed glasses, a white cardigan, and appears stern, like a Catholic school teacher. This referent to Catholicism and Connie Marble as the replenisher of the earth can be read in the iconography of the scene. There is a St. Mary icon on the table beside Connie Marble’s office desk. She is also Divine’s counterpart in the weight department; her lithe anorexic frame showcases her protruding bones and flat chest. Her fiery, crayola red hair is unruly, negating her previously perceived sternness. Neither of the leading women adheres to the typical understanding of what is glamorous. We first meet Connie Marble in her home office, where she is conducting interviews. The main requirement needed to acquire the job is a well-rounded knowledge of Divine and her habits. They are hiring spies to help them figure out why Divine remains the sole holder of the “Filthiest Person Alive” title, and what they can do to steal it away from her. Connie Marble hired her spy, a girl named Cookie, played by Cookie Mueller. The name of the game was to get her in with the exiled Johnson family and relay the confidential information of their whereabouts. Though they were positioned outside Baltimore proper, Divine’s infamy still thwarted the grandiose dreams of the Marbles who remained in the city. Cookie managed to attract the attention of Divine’s delinquent son Crackers. He promises a nice surprise for Cotton after he meets up with Cookie in the city. He gets a ride to town with his mother Divine. She is a hyper sexualized and violent individual; a prostitute and a murderer. She is glamorous and perverse, a grotesque sex symbol that goes patrolling for men while shopping for her birthday party, this is where she is heading when she drops off Crackers for his date with Cookie. While buying items for her birthday party, she
steals a slab of meat, sticks it between her legs to warm it in her “own little oven.” This statement goes back to performance of mother, by referring to the adage a “bun in the oven.” The statement about her “own little oven” only draws attention to the fact that the womb is missing, accentuating her maleness and identifying the performance as parody. Parody allows for the performance of gender, as is indicative of parody we cannot see the drag queen as a serious image. Her performance is one of extreme exaggeration: the drag queen on stage is both the performer of the act and the performer of the female gender.

Shortly after the theft, we see Divine sashaying throughout the city square while the song “The Girl Can’t Help It,” plays on the soundtrack. Divine’s depiction of Babs Johnson played with the conventions of the 1950s “bad girl” and her descent into perversion through her exile from the bourgeois domestic familial space. Her “bad girl” notoriety was the reason why the family was living on the lam in Phoenix, Maryland. They had relocated from their city estate, a two-story white antebellum house, to a trailer in the middle of nowhere. They literally moved to the wrong side of the tracks, glamour was replaced with trash.

This is not Baltimore proper; it is the town closest to the family’s exiled trailer; where Crackers ultimately brings Cookie. There is first a round of introductions, of which only Mama Edie and Cotton are present in the trailer. After the niceties are exchanged, Crackers takes Cookie out to his chicken coop. There he proves his true fondness for fowl, while Cotton watches from outside the chicken wired window. Cookie the spy was not prepared for this particular sexual encounter, where her body was violated by
chickens, she was penetrated and hen-pecked, the blood pooling around the wounds, but despite this abject humiliation, Cookie gathers the information needed by the Marbles.

Divine’s rival family has been working hard to usurp her title. Together the Marbles pick up young female hitchhikers, kidnap them and have them work as baby mules for lesbian couples. Their servant Channing, played by Channing Wilroy, impregnates them. Channing had grown as repulsed as the girls and now instead of raping the girls, he ejaculates in a syringe emptying it into the terrified girls’ vaginal canals. The act of sex that is often perceived as a cathartic exercise, a response to the abject, is turned into a foul and distant act of terror. The act of sex has elements of the abject, yet they all relate to the female, for sperm, according to Julia Kristeva is not an element of the abject. Sex is portrayed in various guises during the course of the film. Channing’s basement duties are the least disturbing and foul, of all the possible sexual scenarios throughout the film.

The feminine abject is seen in motherhood, the two bodies in one phenomenon. Waters plays with this by casting Divine as the mother; her natural body perverts the basic knowledge of the gendered form. He used elements of the abject to emphasize the flaws of domesticity, starting with the representation of maternal figures in the film. Divine played on her (un)desirability by perverting her own sex appeal. She identified with both the glamorous and the comedic drag queen; she blurred the distinction through exaggeration of her own sexuality. Her performance combined with Waters’ early interest in old Hollywood glamour and the melodrama, created a character that embodied and parodied the ultimate of feminine behavior; the mother and the madwoman. Her
appearance in the film mocked what would typically be considered glamorous. Divine managed to squeeze her corpulent body into cocktail dresses that drew attention to her obesity, thus combining the desirable glamour queen with the comedic undesirable through camp performitivity. She retained the blonde wig, but combined it with a receding hairline accentuating her natural baldness. The acrylic wig is then fashioned into an exurbanite beehive updo. Her makeup, done by Van Smith, mocks the glamorous by combining it with the horrific, and grotesque. Divine cannot birth children; her’s is a grotesque body with impenetrable borders, reminiscent of the Romantic Grotesque bodies described in Bakhtin. Whereas; Divine’s body is a closed off, independent form, the girls kidnapped by the Marbles embody the open, flowing two-bodied model of the mother that is simultaneously dying and providing life. The girls in the basement are fed only enough to provide sustenance to the fetus, draining their own sources of nutrition. Once, these infants draw their first breath, their mothers draw their last. The rotting corpse of one mother/incubator, for they really have no other identity, remains in the straw that coats the basement floor. The remaining girl is confronted by her own mortality, any hope that she would escape from the basement prison died with her companion. The lesbian couples provide another outlet for Waters to pervert the nuclear family unit. The lesbian mothers provide another interpretation of the grotesque body; they are biologically open, and free flowing like the mother/incubators, but their sexual proclivities close them off from reproduction. The Marbles see the black-market adoption circuit as an opportunity to exploit their truly despicable behavior, hoping to make some headway in their coup attempts. The money made by these infant proceeds
fuels their elementary school heroin ring, which is only briefly mentioned in the film and
never actually seen.

The family unit is not sacred, it was up for ridicule, and Waters pulled out all the
stops addressing each and all taboos even maternal incest. Once the fact that Cookie was
a spy for the Marble’s was made evident by Patty Hitler, played by Pat Moran. Divine
and her family executed Cookie and mailed her ears to the Marbles. The Marbles would
retaliate by sending feces in the mail to Divine as a birthday gift. Divine’s birthday party
was a carnival for the abject; her guests included Patty Hitler, and a singing anus, the man
who played this part wanted to remain anonymous. Now that they had an address, they
sabotaged the party by calling the cops, and after party guests had relocated, they set fire
to Divine’s trailer. Divine and Crackers had broken into the Marbles’ house as a
retaliatory motion, and licked the furniture in a true abject and cathartic outburst. It was
during the rampage of the Marbles’ house where Divine performs fellatio on her son
Crackers, yet another abject and cathartic, albeit incestual eruption. It was during this
licking frenzy that they discover Channing locked in his bedroom closet, and shortly
thereafter they stumble upon the girls in the basement, the Marbles had brought a new
girl by this point. Channing was locked in the closet by Raymond, as a form of
punishment, after Connie discovers him wearing her clothes, including her underwear.
After he was freed by Divine and her son, he was promptly castrated and killed by the
kidnapped girls he had impregnated. When the Marbles return home, they discover that
their furniture has rejected them, due to the cursed licking, and that their manservant has
lost his manhood and life.
Divine then held a ‘Kangaroo Court’ in front of tabloid reporters, she found the Marbles guilty and publicly executed, and cannibalized them on live television. With the competition out of the way, Divine was still the title holder, but if there was any doubt her infamy was sealed in the closing scene of the film. The scene that made John Waters a cult icon, and instigated bouts over censorship with the Maryland State Board of censors and their head Mary Avara, was the one where Divine ate dog feces, real dog feces.

What is very interesting about the drag queen is not the fact that gender is being performed, but how it is being performed. It is within these constructs that camp plays a significant role in the image of the drag queen; these men are not interested in ‘passing’ as female, meaning that they willfully try to appropriate feminine behavior and can effectively ‘pass’ as the other gender, but instead they exaggerate the serious nature of the feminine to its most frivolous ends. The drag queen specializes in both glamour and comedic stage shows, and these are broken into further subcategories of dance, singing and lip-synching, of which the latter is the lowest grade of performance. Divine’s illustrious, albeit short-lived career even included several recorded albums in the 1980s, where we can tell the full extent of her glam-trash diva persona, and at the same time cementing her in a role outside from her association with John Waters. We see her here as a career driven drag queen.

Glamour is first and foremost the genre most drag queens gravitate towards, especially the young men who are just starting their drag careers. According to Esther
Newton, “the narcissistic extremes of the glamour period are usually the marks of the inexperienced, not fully professionalized female impersonator.”  

Judith Butler articulates this idea in her book *Bodies that Matter*, in her response to the film *Paris is Burning* and what “it suggests about the simultaneous production and subjugation of subjects in a culture which appears to arrange always and in every way for the annihilation of the queers, but which nevertheless produces occasional spaces in which those annihilating norms those killing ideals of gender and race, are mimed, reworked, resignified.”  

Baltimore, like New York, has a thriving gay community, and at the onset of the Gay Rights Movement, Baltimore saw an integration of sex, race and its gay subculture. It is precisely within this space that we find the drag queen reworking the notion of the feminine. Butler calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms.  

As Esther Newton acknowledged in her book *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, the first referent of beauty is always some woman who has been publicly recognized as “glamorous.” The second referent will be some female impersonator who is widely recognized within the profession as “beautiful.”  

Glamorous people like Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield and Judy Garland are all fonder for mimicry due to the fact that these iconic females are the signifieds that created the referents Newton mentioned. Imitation, they say, is the sincerest form of flattery; but in instances such as that of the female impersonator what role does imitation truly play? Where does gender identification lie within such performances? Female impersonators do
not seem to identify themselves as female, so to prematurely adopt that stance with female impersonators would liken gender to drag. Butler touched on this when she said:

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that ‘imitation’ is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations.51 (Italics in original).

Glamour drag is only imitation to a certain extent; female impersonators take the original image and exaggerate the mannerisms and traits of the original. The idea of image is necessary to the understanding of drag queens; Newton mentions several times the relationship with the mirror and the ensuing narcissism of younger performers. “The performers who cannot disassociate themselves from the domination of the mirror are therefore unsocialized in the eyes of the more experienced and/or more sophisticated performers.”52

The image of femininity as seen within these glamorous ‘icons’ is being reproduced for the subculture masses creating in a sense a binary between high and low class glamour. The success of the drag queen is measured in part by how well she can cross that binary and be accepted within the higher class. Which in part means that she is good enough to perform for heterosexual as well as homosexual crowds; yet according to Butler, “heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome, that its efforts to become its idealizations can never finally or fully be achieved, and that it is consistently haunted by the domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself.” In other words, the drag queen will never reach the authenticity of the original, they are always and forever a copy
or recreation of the original. It is this rigidity of gender binaries that allow no room for
the performer to replace the original.

Newton accentuates the fact that “the glamour image is central to drag
performances.” Many drag queens start off imitating famous glamorous women, but as
their acts mature it seems, according to Newton, that “all the non-essential details have
been pared away and the core archetype simply accentuated.” In other words,
experienced drag queens no longer try to emulate Judy Garland or Marilyn Monroe; they
just imitate what it was that they stood for—icons of femininity, women at their best. In
this same line of thinking, Newton describes the glamour show as that which “presents
women at their ‘best,’ that is, at their most desirable and exciting to men.” The
emphasis on ‘men’ is interesting in this passage; it shows how subservient women are in
relation to men, and it is this subservience that is being recreated for the pleasure of these
same men. Beauty alone will not guarantee the success of the drag queen, and this is
where the quality of performance comes into play. The drag queen needs to be talented
in order to move through heterosexual gender constraints; though she will never,
according to Butler, be able to merge the two domains of sexuality she can exist and have
a successful career performing for heterosexual audiences as long as she does not try to
pass herself off as an ‘authentic’ female. Butler follows her previous statement with the
explanation, “In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the
imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes
heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.” What is natural or original when
it comes to gender identity? This is answered here in the parodical image of the
glamorous drag queen; she plays on the traditional stereotypes of femininity, as seen within the behavior of the stars.

Therefore, glamour is ideally, a slender body with the appearance of large breasts and wide hips, a youthful face with “good” bone structure, skin that seems soft but is heavily and dramatically made-up, jewelry (especially earrings), a long haired wig (preferably blond and in a sophisticated style), a gown (preferably low-cut and floor length), and invariably, high-heeled shoes. Drag queens that do not possess the necessary qualities to be considered glamorous can always fall back on humor. Comedy, whether slap-stick or stand-up, is just as respectable as glamour; and in fact many stand-up comics still don the glamour attire. It is within the comedy genre however, that we find the campy queen, it is her sexist and self-deprecating humor makes light of the roles women play in society. Where the glamorous drag queens try to be sexually appealing to men, the comedic drag queens base their acts around what is essentially undesirable to men. His fascination for Hollywood and the melodrama allowed his movies to offer commentary and accompanying revision of the ideological functions of the melodrama. He was able to revise the melodrama through abject humor and glamour. His concept of glamour had not changed since he was a child, he continued to find the unconventional beautiful. Waters took this further by making his beautiful people grotesque. Films like Pink Flamingos and Desperate Living feature personalities who are, or are made up to look like negatives of movie stars. Movie stars Mae West and Jayne Mansfield appealed to Waters because they were both glamorous yet unconventional. Their performances already fit within the camp genre, and inspired Waters to mix camp
glamour with the abject. This combination would serve as the basis for the Babs Johnson character in *Pink Flamingos*, played by Divine. Divine’s image is one of the female becoming more abject through her traumas and yet struggling to maintain, via her glamorous looks, and her claims on our attention.\(^{59}\)

Drag queens thrive within the mode of Low Camp. Camp is how they counteract the seriousness of the original, authentic female image with one that will never fully achieve this right of femininity; they perform femininity through mimicry, or rather exaggerated mimicry, to offset the strict gender binaries without upsetting the delicate balance of social norms. The comedic acts of drag queens exist fully in the realm of Camp. According to Newton, “The stand-up comic is the specialized, professionally performing version of the best-defined role figure in homosexual life, the campy queen.”\(^{60}\) Comedy is the second most prevalent performance in the drag community due to its relationship with Camp performance. The Camp image has its roots not in drag shows, but in the homosexual subculture.\(^{61}\) The campy queen’s role is cemented in comedy, where they themselves are often the brunt of their own jokes due the fact that they are less attractive than their glamorous counterparts. “Whatever the camp’s ‘objective’ physical appearance, his most successful joke is on himself,” as stipulated by Newton; “the camp is always the evil stepmother, the jealous ugly sisters, or the wicked queen of which the mirror always mocks.”\(^{62}\) Divine knew the joke was on her, and her physical appearance in the film had all the earmarks of campy drag.

Divine, born Glenn Harris Milstead was a childhood friend and cohort of director John Waters. She began dressing in drag as a teenager, and like most novice drag queens
she began her career by emulating glamorous women such as Jackie Kennedy. Her shelf life as a glamour queen was short-lived due to the fact that he was neither thin nor beautiful. This was when Milstead made the move to comedy and became the tacky, ultra campy femme fatale personage known as Divine. To understand the image of Divine, one must first understand what is meant by “tacky drag.” Tacky drag is essentially a deviation of the glamour ideal. Newton defines the word “tacky” to mean cheap, shoddy, or of poor quality.¹³ So, that meant instead of donning the glamorous Jackie Kennedy wig from her youth, Divine was now sporting an exaggerated hairline, accentuating the fact that she was balding, topped off with a cheap acrylic wig. The luminous stage makeup was now replaced by a thick layer of cakey cosmetics coating his aging face. Age is yet another reason for her transition to comedy. Her creepy glam persona, an exaggerated combination of camp and horror, would not be complete without the bright blue eye shadow arcs that reach the bottom of her exaggerated hairline. Divine, like the campy queen she was, mocked herself by flaunting her flaws and showcasing her shortcomings. Divine was an obese individual; she weighed in at around 300 pounds before she died of a heart attack in 1988. Glamour queens cannot be obese because that is not appealing to the typical male audience; yet, Divine was able to keep some absurd sex appeal in her corpulence. The use of tacky makeup and clothing to accentuate the low-class stature of Divine was Waters’ decision; this allowed her the room to perfect his art that of turning the abject glamorous.

This notion of the abject is not a common theme in drag shows, but it is relevant when looking at the film *Pink Flamingos*. Waters’ 1972 film takes Divine and places her
squarely between the roles of drag queen performer, hardened criminal, housewife mother and the sexual pervert whose appetite is lascivious. It is best to approach this one theme at a time in order to explain how Divine was able to embody all these contradictory personas while remaining glamorous. Herein lies the greatest contradiction of the film, Waters finds glamour in the absurd, but according to all things drag, glamour and camp are two distinct classes of performance.

An overweight, balding drag queen is not usually the foremost thought when dealing with the concept of glamour; yet, we have Divine the breaker of the mold, the purveyor of low class sentimentality before us challenging the very idea of what is glamorous or tacky. Yes, Divine was a tacky individual in behavior as well as in manner of dress. Tacky, in this instance, does not apply to those queens who are underdressed, but to a glamour performer who looks cheap and tawdry. Divine’s style is tacky plain and simple. She wears magenta taffeta dresses that hugged tightly around her bulging folds. This is just one visible example of how clothing is a signifier of low class taste. Waters adds to this image by placing Divine, as Babs Johnson, in a trailer with her son Crackers, her domestic partner Cotton, and her mentally retarded mother who is readily read as infantile. Each character embodies and addresses the taboo nature of kinship relations that have their seed in Freudian analysis. Divine in essence not only looks cheap and tawdry, but is cheap and tawdry.

Waters has written the movie in a way as to allow Divine to mock herself, which is expertly done through the use of transy drag. In transy drag the focus is on deviation of sexuality within glamour. Divine is praised for her deviancy. The main premise of the
film explicitly deals with this notion of deviancy and abjection. Divine, as Babs Johnson, is widely known as the “Filthiest Person Alive” which in itself should connote the extent to which deviancy plays a role in the lifestyles of the main characters. Divine’s body is marked as deviant. Her placement in society was never innocent; she is recognized as a prostitute, a murderer and all around malcontent, whose widely recognized title infers the critique on the feminist ideals of beauty and cleanliness. Divine’s image is comprised of both transy and tacky drag, marked by both her abnormal nature and low class visibility. Butler touches on this idea of marked bodies in relation to drag queens, meaning that their sexual orientation/ identity is already marked upon them. How is Divine’s image marked? The image of the drag queen prior to Pink Flamingos was an image steeped in humor; drag queens were entertaining rather than scary. This concept of the marked body should be explained better. An individual’s body leaves traces of itself behind in the world, footprints, shadows, condensation on windows, fingerprints, anything that remains however so briefly after the body has been removed. The body as a marked entity implies the opposite dynamic; one’s identity is marked, rather imprinted, onto the body through the rubric of sexuality.

The mark imprinted on Divine/Babs is also visible within the confines of the ball circuit that Butler mentioned in Bodies that Matter. They are marked as queer, a deviant class of individuals juxtaposed against images of ‘normal’ people. These normal people are also marked, as is every human body, by the persons and things that comprise their identity. Venus Extravaganza, for instance, was imprinted with the feminist notion that her life would be complete if she had a man who loved her, adopted children to mother,
and a woman’s body. Cultural ideals create these marks on individuals which in turn are used to define terms such as femininity and masculinity, but what of the people who fall within the cracks of the feminine and the masculine? What of those people like Babs Johnson? Her character exists between the masculine and the feminine, each pulling in their direction trying to stake claim on an intangible and mutable construct.

Sex is not static, it is a kinetic ever in flux construct that risks becoming stagnant if impossibly marked as deviant. A heterosexual marking has no such obvious problems due to the cultural acceptance of heterosexuality as the norm. The drag queen thus is marked. It is from these cultural markings, that the drag queen emerged as a sexualized being playing to both homosexual as was well as heterosexual desires. Glamour drag as previously mentioned is the highest ranking of respectable drag performances, with comedic drag running a close second. Each are different in their own way, with very individualized characteristics, but these characteristics are constricting, they allow no flow from genre to genre. However, Divine along with John Waters were able to cross these seemingly static constructions in order to critique the nature of sexuality and the binaries that repress them. Divine was able to be glamorous and camp, sexualized yet unappealing, tasteless and crass. The body has not escaped notation, it is still marked as one or the other, but instead of fighting against the marked body he fights with the marked body. It is here that the comedic queen makes her mark, by mocking the self; she is attacking the hierarchy of sexuality and gender.

Divine calls attention to her male genitalia at the same time performing her femininity, one act masks the other allowing or rather the two merge creating a new breed
of individual, a tabula rasa unmarked by dominant culture. Dominant culture constantly finds the need to classify everything; gender and sexuality are no exception. Everything is broken into binaries man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, and normal/deviant and to try to survive within the middle of these binaries is nearly impossible.

The subcategories of drag are indication enough on the fact that everything is objectified and classified. Drag queens cannot just be performers; they have to be glamorous, talented, cutthroat in their profession, beautiful, and funny. Concepts of masculinity and femininity merge at times producing this alternative being this drag queen extraordinaire, Divine. She exists between binaries at once man and woman, beautiful and ugly, moral and deviant, by encompassing all these she proves herself to be the best drag queen out of Baltimore, Maryland. Waters made Divine’s career, and in turn he made Waters’ career.
CHAPTER 3: JOHN WATERS’ BALTIMORE AS SEEN IN THE FILM PECKER

John Waters finds his creative influence in Baltimore, Maryland. He has used his hometown as the setting in all of his films. Although content may change from film to film, his inspiration is always found in the city. His 1972 film, *Pink Flamingos*, placed in Baltimore, focuses more on the obscenely comical aspects of the city, mainly fabricated; whereas *Pecker* takes us through the basic everyday moments of Baltimore via humorous observations. Pecker is both voyeur and flâneur, using the city and its noises and people that he encounters while walking and waiting, to play on societal idiosyncrasies. He does this through perverse, oddball representations of these experiences in his films. For the purpose of this paper I am focusing on his 1999 film *Pecker*. A semi-autobiographical film about a young photographer that goes around Hampden, the last truly white district of Baltimore, chronicling what he sees embodying that image of voyeur and flâneur. Pecker, played by Edward Furlong, is a revision of Waters himself. John Waters “photographic interests are complex. He’s drawn to rephotographing movie images as a way to explore the gray areas between fact and fiction, between still and moving images. He’s interested in using photography to document the malleability of images, language, and memory. His photographic project is dependent upon the process of re-vision, of looking at images again, repeatedly and carefully, to see what new readings and narratives can be coaxed out of them.”

Although, the images Pecker captures are of people and places directly related to him; they are so diverse in nature and connotation which allows Waters to comment on all the things that are of importance to him, such as religion, domesticity, homelessness,
celebrity, sexuality and class. Both Waters and Pecker have a common individualistic vision that deals with their Baltimore hometown. Waters has stated,

I would never want to live anywhere but Baltimore. You can look far and wide, but you’ll never discover a stranger city with such extreme style. It’s as if every eccentric in the South decided to move north, ran out of gas in Baltimore, and decided to stay. The film starts off showing Pecker at work at the Sub Pit, which is an actual location in Baltimore. It is a greasy hole in the wall sub joint, that doesn’t look too kindly on the homeless, as is shown in a later scene. He leaves the restaurant and makes his way through the city on a bus chronicling every sight and action that he encounters through photography. While on the bus, Waters offers the viewer a panorama of the city of Baltimore. Through the window we see Baltimore captured in its external space, showing skyscrapers, the highway systems on which they are traveling, the Inner Harbor and finally the community of Hampden where Pecker and his family reside. Pecker’s use of photography to document the city is very similar to the same way that Waters’ gathers his inspiration. They each gain inspiration from the city that is around them, but it is not the city that everybody else sees; they have a certain insight to what some may call the underground. But this is the world in which they live, and they show it as they see it. As Pecker was riding the bus, watching the scenery of Baltimore pass by through the window he captured the rhythm of the city through the lens of his second-hand camera. Like in Henri Lefebvre’s discussion on rhythm analysis and the city, “the window offers views that are more than spectacles.” While on the bus he photographs a woman shaving her legs, and other bus patrons.
Pecker meets up with his kleptomaniac friend Matt and they go ‘shopping for others,’ which consists of going down the aisles of the local grocery store, placing random items in the customers’ carts when they were not looking, and documenting each one. This all served to cause a diversion while Matt stole more film for Pecker to use. This particular act of stealing the film is an actual detail in the life of the director. He had received a Brownie 8mm camera for his seventeenth birthday, and his friend Mona who worked in a photo supply store stole all the film he needed to make his first black and white ‘underground’ film. Like Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘man of the crowd’ they go where the fascinating characters of the city lead them they are where the art is located. Capturing what passes them by. As Lefebvre said, “the perpetual is made up of chance and encounters.” Their art relies on these chance encounters; they wait for that one defining moment. This for them could be anything from a six car pile up to a prostitute soliciting herself in the bus station. Nothing is off limits.

The film revolves around Pecker’s immediate family and close friends, and their distinctive behavioral flares. Pecker’s mother and father respectively own and operate a second hand store and a failing bar. His mother keeps the homeless in new clothes for quarters, and his father is barely making that on a slow day. His grandmother Mi Mama is an entrepreneur in her own right; she runs a Pit-Beef stand for truckers in the driveway of their house. Their house is always alive with the noise and rhythm of the honking horns of hungry truckers. Mi Mama is situated on both sides of the window, simultaneously occupying both internal and external space. She is able to capture the rhythm of the street because she occupies a space that is both inside and out. Through these characters
Waters is offering up a small cross-section of the local flavor in Baltimore. Through them he explores the themes of domesticity and religion. Their domestic life is quaint, cluttered and linear; they live in a routine revolving around work, family and religion. His mother is also in charge of maintaining Pecker’s youngest sister Little Krissy. She is a sugar addicted child that is never content unless she is in the midst of a sugar rush. Whereas most mothers would try to curb their child’s sugar intake, his mother always praises her with candy and soda. Mi Mama is a ventriloquist during her time away from the stand. She is a religious zealot in possession of a Virgin Mary icon, whom she makes speak believing it is a miracle each and every time. A symbol of compassion, Mary keeps watch over the house while resting within her hyper real shrine. These characters are composites of local Baltimoreans, shopkeepers, religious zealots, bar owners and criminals. Waters loves the people of Baltimore, they are what keep him interested in the city; he advises to meet people “it’s not hard, the streets are teeming with all sorts of lunatics eager to make friends.”

At Shelley’s fascist Sit-n-Spin Laundromat the constant whirring noise of the washing machines and dryers completes a composition of rhythm. It is a noise that captures the element of the lower-middle class, and the local people who populate that City. There is a woman who is using the public washing machines to dye her clothes, which is explicitly forbidden within Shelley’s fascist regime. Shelley, Pecker’s girlfriend, lives for this laundromat, and can’t see past the stains on the clothes to see the art that presents itself to him. Although, Pecker is surrounded by all the noises and rhythms of
the laundromat he prefers to capture the essence of Shelley as she provocatively unzips her shirt for the camera.

The *Pelt Room* scene is drawn from the hard-core lesbian bars in Baltimore, which are some of Waters’ favorite hangouts. He said that there is this strange bar near the waterfront.

The clientele is made up of hillbilly truck drivers who come to cruise the half-finished sex changes who hang out in between medical appointments at the nearby Johns Hopkins Hospital. An extremely butch lesbian, whose blackheads around her lips popped every time she smiled, explained to me that *she* could hustle the truck drivers, they were so horny. (Italics in original). 72

The lesbians at *The Pelt Room* are butch, hardcore women who disregard the laws about the strippers exposing pubic hair. The women that Waters used to play the lesbians in the film are the type of hard core lesbians that would frighten the clientele at the strip club, similar to the mode of gender role reversal that Waters played on in *Pink Flamingos*.

“Judging from the missing teeth and tattoos on these women, I gather they like to fight and love nothing more than beating the shit out of a man,”73 and they came close when they caught Pecker peeking in the window. There is a close-up shot of a lesbian stripper’s pubic hair that he got while peering through a window at *The Pelt Room*, before he was thrown out for trespassing. Whereas Lefebvre addresses the window as being located where the viewer peers out into the street, Pecker does the opposite peering into the interior space of the bar. At this point he is no longer just a viewer; he is a voyeur. The Pelt Room was full of butch lesbians wearing flannel cut-off shirts watching other butch women strip down to their underwear. Voyeurism is a necessary component of abjection, meaning the inclusion of the voyeur is needed for Waters to portray the abject scenes
found in his Baltimore, and the gay bar scenes seem particularly fruitful with elements of abjection.

Pecker’s sister Tina works as an announcer at the gay bar, *The Fudge Palace* in the film. The club is closed off, a dark internal space that confines the viewer’s gaze to the bar where there is no window; the bar would not be content with a window that stared into a parking lot.⁷⁴ The men and their thump-thump gyrating dance were the spectacle, creating their own rhythms. Each had their own rhythm to which they strutted in Speedos across the bar disrupted in their walk by the patrons addressing them with terms that initiate, maintain or interrupt contact.⁷⁵ The men are accosted by dollar bills in large sweaty hands that were pawing for their attention. This led to an introduction to the term tea-bagging, a particular act of resting one’s testicles on the head of another person. This particular act was prohibited by the owner, as was the exposure of pubic hair at *The Pelt Room*. The bars however did not always abide by the rules, there were instances at both where this occurred and Pecker captured it on film and had it on display at his first art show. In itself the show was a window opening up the internal space of Baltimore.

Back at the Sub Pit Pecker is setting up for his first art show. They are a series of black and white prints that focuses on his family, friends and the abject crevices of the city. All the images on display were gathered during his documented traveling of the city earlier in the film. By Pecker documenting his experiences during the day, he captures the act of “passing by” not allowing the moment, the memory to slip past. Walking is a necessary component of the City, one that allows the denizens of the city to take in the elements and rhythms that comprise the city.⁷⁶ It is while his first art show is on display
at the Sub Pit; that his work captures the attention of one New York art dealer, who sees his work as being nothing more than documentation of the uncultured environment in which he lives and offers him a show in New York. This will be his first taste of celebrity.

His show is recognized nationally, earning a language of praise for Baltimore’s native son. He lands on the cover of Art Forum, yet he does not seem corrupted by his newly found celebrity status. Pecker’s mapping of his city and its citizens are misunderstood by the New York art crowd. They took his work as proof that the people and city was uncultured, their fascination was founded on difference, seeing the Baltimore as Other. The exhibit in New York caused lingering strife in the lives of all the characters that went. Traveling to New York, and witnessing what the city had to offer, the fanfare of the city, the pedestrians and skyscrapers the family felt overwhelmed and uncomfortable in need of the stability of Baltimore. Upon returning to the city, they found their house had been robbed, and child services came to take away Krissy based solely on information gathered through Pecker’s pictures. In the end they were able to keep Krissy; they just had to promise to put her on Ritalin in order to curb her hyperactivity. She turns into a vegetable addict, she may have kicked the sugar habit but her addictive personality won’t allow her to be free of addiction. Shelley walked off the bus to kiss the Baltimore ground. She could not enjoy New York, for fear that her customers at the laundromat were breaking all the rules, and she was an outcast in a new world. “Baltimore,” according to Waters, “has the very best local color, because no one is influenced by New York or West Coast trends. Baltimore madness is highly original.”
This particular madness, that Waters’ addresses in his film is entirely based on the originality of the city, and its populace. Waters claims that shopping bags are necessary accessories for bathroom solicitation, the perpetrator will place his feet in the shopping bags to disguise the fact that there are two people in the stall. This perverse element of Baltimore is included in the film; after Pecker is seduced by Rory, his agent, played by Lili Taylor. Shelley watches Rory move in on Pecker from outside his basement window; once again an example of looking inside from the outside reaffirming her status of outsider. She is an outsider in the art world as well as an outsider in location to the house. Shelley flees on foot to be followed by the startled Pecker. He follows her path, careening around corners, running as fast as he can he finally catches up with her at the voting polls. Pecker sneaks into her stall, places his feet in her bags disguising the fact that there are two people in the booth. This technique worked nicely until the booth started to rock, creating a scratchy metallic sound scaring the other voters.

Baltimore is one of the few cities in the United States to have row houses. Row houses were built after World War II to provide economic housing for veterans and their families; today they are primarily housing units for the poor. Although, Pecker does not live in a row house, Waters used them in a scene to help define iconic Baltimore. The Friends of The Whitney are coming to Baltimore to see Pecker’s second art show; he refused to go back to New York. The Friends of The Whitney see the row houses from the car window as they were being driven through the streets of Baltimore; to them the row houses were quaint and kitschy uniform structures. As tourists they saw Baltimore as a spectacle, uncultured and cut off from normal society; this interpretation was fueled by
Pecker’s photography. They feel as though they are privy to inside knowledge on Baltimore life, but it is all just a simulation. Although, shot on location these row houses are as real to them as Disneyland. There is no substance in their perception, the row houses function as mere tourist attractions which allow the New Yorkers to reaffirm their cultured status. In Waters’ book, *Shock Value*, he talks about the type of people who populate rowhouses. Hillbillies live in the rowhouses where they drag their “couches out on the lawn, plug in TVs and seem oblivious to the noises of the street and whatever else encroaches on their family gatherings.” This was the exact scene The Friends of the Whitney wanted to witness.

Following Pecker’s success in New York, his father reopens his bar now named *Pecker’s Place*. This is the locale of Pecker’s second art show, where on display were intimate portraits of the elitist New York art crowd, showing their raw human side just like he did with his family and friends. The Friends of the Whitney were expecting more photography that chronicled his family and city; instead they were confronted by their own images looking uncultured and crass. The Baltimore they witnessed coming in was just a façade, a simulation of what they wanted to see.

Walking through the city, whether New York or Baltimore is a manipulation of spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them.

This de Certeau passage, one’s relation to the city is based entirely on space; whether external or internal. The city is the same everywhere, metropolitan, cosmopolitan, quaint or patriotic, liberal or conservative; it is only the people who change from place to place. The city makes the person, as Baltimore has for John Waters; his identity is reliant on it.
The City is always alive, thriving in motion and sound creating the persons that populate its confines. The characters in Pecker are reliant on their city, it is their identity; they are Baltimoreans. The city induces the local flavor, yet the character is unique to Baltimore alone-as is their dialect. According to Waters, “Baltimorese is harder to learn than Swahili.” It is everything about Baltimore that inspires John Waters, the people, the sights and noises; he will often just sit and wait for something interesting to happen. These are the moments that make up his artwork, and *Pecker* was the best film to use to show how the Baltimorean Other interacted with the New York art elite, yet in the end they occupied the same space. Waters shows this coming together in the final bar scene of the film, the location of Pecker’s second art show, the one where the Friends of the Whitney discovered that they were the subjects. After the mood lightened, and the two crowds realized they were more alike than they thought they began to integrate and celebrate. In the final moments of the film, Pecker, in a move to liken him even more to John Waters, he decides that his next project will be to direct a film.
CHAPTER 4: JOHN WATERS’ TWELVE ASSHOLES AND A DIRTY FOOT

John Waters’ photographic serial “Twelve Assholes and a Dirty Foot” addresses issues of homosexuality, identity, abjection, filth and defilement through camp parody. Camp in its essence is a product of homosexual culture which critiques the dominant culture. By displaying images that could be construed as offensive, “an anal dirtiness that fixates” Waters is encouraging his audience to confront their fears and aversions towards homosexuality and gay culture by exaggerating its queerness.

Presented behind a red velvet curtain, the twelve images of male assholes address the location of male homosexual encounters. The inclusion of the dirty foot helps to propel the interpretation that homosexual desire is filthy and abject. By including thirteen images he is exaggerating the notion that homosexuality is taboo, in much the same way Warhol addressed the issue of homosexual desire as a criminal offense in his “Thirteen Most Wanted Men.” The number thirteen is recognized as taboo and unlucky in our culture, but within the context of their respective pieces it is used as an element of Camp.

Camp, like any particular subcultural attitude in our society, operates within the larger boundaries of a racist, patriarchal, bourgeois culture. That it defines itself in difference from the dominant culture does not automatically construct Camp as radically oppositional. Only an audience and the work’s exhibition context can complete that subversion.

Before the Stonewall Riots in 1969, homosexuality was considered to be a psychological disease. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental diseases. The most recent association between homosexuality and disease was during the AIDs epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. John Waters’ photographic series was created in 1996, when the threat of AIDs was still present in the dominant culture.
Many people still see AIDs as a homosexual disease and Waters’ is addressing this homophobia and fear of contagion through camp imagery. By juxtaposing the images of assholes with that of a dirty foot, he is playing on the relationship of filth and contagion or disease. Through Waters’ method of display he is asking his audience to confront their own fears of disease. Mary Douglas said, “We shall not expect to understand other people’s ideas of contagion, sacred or secular, until we have confronted our own.”

Through camp parody Waters’ trivializes the serious nature of the disease by treating the pictures as snapshots of sexual deviancy. It is a humorous tongue-in-cheek statement to dominant culture telling them to ‘kiss my ass.’ There is also a trash element to the pictures; mocking the middle class and the rampant spread of venereal disease in Baltimore, his hometown and current residence. Tongue and cheek visibility in art is an element of camp and pop art; he uses this in his films and artworks to critique society while treating his issues with offbeat dark humor. At the root of Waters’ humor, like that in Pop art is disgust; “genuine disgust with a society permeated by the ideological outlook and moral standards of a vastly expanded middle class.” It is this middle class that comprises Waters’ audience; the moral standards and issues of the middle class who see homosexuality as an unnatural defilement of the body. By focusing on the asshole in these photographs, Waters is treating the seriousness of sexuality as a mere impish prank. The lighthearted display is both humorous, and confrontational. He is exaggerating their identity as ‘sexual deviant’ through a “perverse mode of aestheticism.” The viewer has become voyeur through confrontation with these images; a perverse desire that appears
when the object, the assholes, shifts toward the abject which is a necessary component in object relation. ⁹⁰

This perverse desire upsets the delicate moral balance of the middle class. Having been raised Catholic himself; Waters maintains a detached relationship with Catholicism by critiquing morality of the masses. Kristeva maintains that “it is within that undecidable space, logically coming before the choice of sexual object, that the religious answer to abjection breaks in: defilement, taboo, sin.” ⁹¹ (Italics in original text). The Catholic Church’s stance on homosexual desire and identity is concurrent with the religious answer to abjection; because it is not the norm it is deemed morally offensive. As mentioned earlier, his inclusion of the dirty foot aids in the interpretation of the images as abject, filthy and an insult on the morality of the dominant culture. It is the thirteenth print that steers the series away from being recognized as a purely humorous slant on the nature of homosexual desire.

Waters sets the stage, literally, for presenting the performative aspects of sexual identity. By positioning the photographs behind the red velvet curtain he is playing on gender performance and its relationship to sexuality and camp. According to Judith Butler, “Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance.” ⁹² The ways in which the photographs are arranged show the bodies’ motion as they pose for the camera, the camera being an instrument of desire in the hands of the artist. ⁹³ It is not just the fact that the actors are performing for the camera, though there is a hint of theatricality especially the use of the red velvet
curtain, the participants are treating their bodies as an extension to their sexuality. They are trying to get a rise out of the audience.

The photographs are stills from pornography films, appropriated by the artist to address the performative nature of sexuality. Thinking of this piece as segments of appropriated pornography heightens the filth element of the work. Many of the stills show the actors spreading their ass cheeks, posed and ready for penetration. The curtain in this case doubles in meaning by performing the same function as the brown paper in which porno magazines are wrapped. Waters’ is unwrapping images of pornography in the museum, spreading the curtain open as the bodies are spreading themselves open. He is questioning the difference between fine art and pornography. Bruce Hainley brought up this particular topic in *Art-A Sex Book*:

> People complain about certain images: ‘Oh its pornography, not art.’ Yet looking itself is an activity which has pornographic aspects: we look at things, we are always looking, every waking moment of the day, and we love to watch certain things repeated over and over. We’re scoporheic beings. There is something sexy about all that looking, but there is also something a little disturbing about it, pornographic.  

This also cements Waters’ role of voyeur, as he had to watch the films repeatedly in order to photograph the precise moment the actors are opening their bodies up for sexual fulfillment. He is commenting on the modes of censorship that surround illicit material such as pornography. His many trials with the Maryland State Censor Board and its former secretary Mary Avara have left Waters more determined than ever to fight censorship. The earlier trials of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work at the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Museum and Larry Flynt must have inspired him to use pornography stills as the subject matter in this series. Their trials, especially CCAM’s, opened the door
for pornographic discourse. Even though his stills are appropriated from adult films, are they necessarily pornographic? He arranges the images in such a way, that it is not immediately noticeable that they are pornographic images. They are “gestures of exaggerated emphasis” playing on gender performativity and identity.  

Butler says that,  

The abjection of homosexuality can take place only through an identification with that abjection, an identification that must be disavowed, an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it, an identification that institutes that abjection and sustains it.  

Yet, according to Kristeva “jouissance, or pleasure, demands an abjection from which identity becomes absent.”  

Waters is taking the idea that homosexual sex is filthy and disgusting and exaggerating it by his inclusion of pornography stills which he uses to address sexual pleasure and longing.  

The actors have no identity, all that is visible is their assholes which act as their identifiable mark, and like a fingerprint no two are exactly alike. By appropriating these scenes he creates his own trash narrative of pornographic sex and defilement of the body. His camera, his voyeuristic tool depends on “the masculine privilege of the disembodied gaze, the gaze that has the power to produce bodies, but which is itself no body.”  

If there is no body, there can’t be disease or bodily defilement only the gaze which through voyeuristic interpretation gives the narrative its meaning. He is recognizing the homosexual as Other in dominant culture, and by using pornographic stills he makes light of the stigma attached to alternative sexuality; that it is unnatural, deviant and destroying the moralistic fiber of the nation. Mary Douglas states that it is “our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns,” meaning that the reaction of the populace, the dominant culture is what condemns the behavior of an Other.
Since the AIDs crisis, actors in pornography films are required by law to be regularly tested for various venereal diseases including AIDs, making the risk of contagion more of a controlled matter within a controlled environment. Once something is labeled as dirty it is forever dirty, like Lady Macbeth’s hands. Within our society there is still a fear of homosexuality, and what it may do to upset the status quo. Pornography, especially gay pornography is still seen as pure deviant trash. By including stills from gay pornography he is both critiquing censorship and homosexuality. The use of camp parody is originally a gay concept, it is even rumored to be an Australian term meaning “Criminal Adult Male Prostitute.” If this is true, and you apply it to his use of pornographic stills he is critiquing the idea that homosexuality is criminal. And much like prostitution, pornography is sexual but not intimate. Waters is interested in producing narratives that confront the nature of sexuality, and by exposing this particular narrative in a museum setting he is intimately confronting the viewer with images of sodomitic desire. He is purposeful in his bad taste; he knows that it is only in a camp setting that trash can be seen as something beautiful. He likes to accentuate the flaws in culture, and then confront his audience with images that startle, confuse, and disgust. His photographic narrative does all three.

First, one is startled upon the curtain opening. His grand unveiling opens up discourse on sexuality through the manner in which the piece is received, either good or bad he has created a forum for discussion. The arrangement of the images moves from position to position finally ending with the image of a dirty foot hanging off the end of a bed. This is the image that confuses; what is the purpose of the foot? Does it have some
higher symbolic meaning? Or, is it just representative of that moment post coitus when the body is drained of all energy? The lone dirty foot that hangs loosely in the frame, what does it mean? It is dirty by description, but its situation with images of assholes, places that both produce excrement and for gay men function as the place of sexual pleasure and enjoyment, makes it even dirtier by association. Kristeva states that,

Urine, blood, sperm and excrement then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its “own and clean self.” The abjection of those flows from within suddenly becomes the sole “object” of sexual desire—a true “abject.”

His series portrays the sexual being as dirty, playing on the religious notion that sex should not be pleasurable and only for reproduction purposes, anything else is considered sinful. He is bringing together the sacred and the secular by critiquing the Catholic Church’s stance on homosexuality, they can have priests who molest little children but homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. He recognizes this hypocrisy and uses it to show that there is “no separation between the spheres of religion and ordinary life.” Sex exists everywhere. The asshole as a place or ‘object’ of desire, disgusts many people but the use of Camp imagery allows gay male identity and the performance of gender to displace disgust through humor and laughter. Richardson deduced that, “Camp discriminates against the best in order to purify and commemorate the worse.” Waters is doing exactly that through his critique on the Catholic Church, he is pointing out the flaws of the institution to reify his claim that sexual desire is both pleasurable and natural despite orientation.

Perceptions of his narrative vary from viewer to viewer, their participation is necessary to its interpretation. Voyeurism is present in the production of homosexual as
Other, the gaze is met with disregard, it is ignored and displaced leaving the viewer in a state of confrontation with self. The gaze is averted back to the viewer, acting as a mirror that reflects and confronts ones notion of gender formation and sexual orientation. There is a certain fascination with people to watch how people other than us behave in society. Humans notice difference, if everything was sunshine and flowers it would get old quick, we need difference, we need to be confronted with thoughts and images that we may find distasteful in order to transcend the mundane. It’s like craneing your neck to witness a car crash, it is in bad taste but instinctual, you can’t help yourself. Fascination and disgust are two sides of the same coin, they need each other. Though these images may disgust some due to content or display, they still look. That is the key point Waters is trying to address. Confrontation with something that evokes disgust, like gay pornography, is needed to propel discourse on the position of the Other in dominant culture. Sodomy, though no longer a criminal offense, is still stigmatized as perverse and unnatural. But to whom is it perverse an unnatural?

Religion sees sodomy as an abomination, a defilement of “God’s temple.” Dominant culture still blames homosexuals for the AIDS crisis, even though drug addicts make up the majority of those infected in contemporary society. Dominant culture does not blame all homosexuals, just gay men. Lesbians are intriguing, gay men are filthy; it is only through the knowledge of where their desire lies that creates this rift. By focusing on the assholes he is confronting the notion of what is filth; the juxtaposition with the dirty foot normalizes the narrative through parody which gives the piece a playful quality. John Adkins Richardson quoted from Susan Sontag’s essay “Notes on Camp” states that:
Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the esthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness.\textsuperscript{106}

Camp is flamboyant in nature, an embellishment of heterosexual behavior within homosexual confines. Waters uses this embellishment in his narrative piece, exaggerating the placement of homosexual desire by cropping stills from pornographic films in order to focus on the assholes of the various actors. He is stating that homosexual desire is grounded in abjection. The asshole is abject in function as both a place where excrement leaves the body and sperm enters into the body. The intermingling of these two functions is disgusting and dirty to the dominant culture, yet in the terms of male homosexual desire the asshole is the location of sexual pleasure and gratification. As I stated earlier, we as humans gravitate towards those things that horrify and disgust us, there is a certain curiosity that drives us to look. Through the action of looking we are voyeurs, our gaze is averted by the lack of recognition in the actors and bounces back onto us forcing us to confront our preconceptions of the homosexual Other. Waters succeeded in his attempt to debase prejudices toward homosexuality and gay culture by trivializing the seriousness of the matter, and camp parody was the perfect vehicle to address such issues.\textsuperscript{107} By opening up the red velvet curtain to reveal pornographic images of homosexuality he is challenging notions of what is considered desirable in the dominant culture. Sex is disgusting and dirty, a truer example of abjection has never existed, but he is taking this notion of sex being dirty and exaggerating it through the visual imagery of the cropped pornography stills. In the images where the actors are spreading open their ass cheeks, he is addressing the moralistic idea that homosexuality is a defilement of the body; this
portal is the home of sexual pleasure, disease and filth. The actors’ bodies are performing their sexual desire through their various positions within the framework of the film stills. Put together as a narrative they writhe like a cat in heat, that calls out for sexual fulfillment once fulfilled through the gaze of the voyeuristic viewer culminates with the thirteenth frame with the image of the relaxed dirty foot. The taboo image of male homosexual desire is combined with camp humor to parody the dominant culture’s moralistic rejection of all things Other. Then the curtain closes leaving the audience to ponder the nature of sexuality, in the terms of what is moral, dirty, and normal not forgetting to answer the all important question of, to whom is it all of these things.
CONCLUSION

John Waters has tested the boundaries and limitations of art creation and appreciation for over thirty years. Now heralded as a cult film visionary, Waters has firmly cemented the placement of trash and low camp in the annals of Art History. Trash or camp art can be seen as the flipside of Pop Art, whereas pop art is popular and can be appreciated by the laymen it takes a certain kind of raw, twisted imagination and a penchant for the truly disgusting and absurd to appreciate camp art. Waters’ has that particular disposition, and that means nothing is sacred.

*Pink Flamingos*, Waters’ breakthrough hit, was filmed on a minimal budget in and around his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. It was with this film that Waters’ showcased his penchant for the truly disgusting and absurd. It is described as being an exercise in poor taste, but according to Waters there is “good” bad taste and “bad” bad taste. The difference, as dictated by Waters, is that “bad” bad taste lacks originality and creativity; it is just there to disgust. *Pink Flamingos*, though at times truly disgusting and appalling, demands the audience’s undivided attention due to the highly original content. As highlighted in Chapter Two, *Pink Flamingos* incorporates elements of abjection, camp and the grotesque body; an attempt by Waters to make trailer life even trashier.

A variable cast of misfits and delinquents comprised the actors in Waters’ early films. This cast of characters was called the Dreamlanders, many of which were introduced in Chapter Two. Glenn Milstead better known as Divine is by far the most recognizable of his cast members, and an invaluable asset when discussing his film
catalog. Divine is the abject and the grotesque personified, and his penchant for drag opened the discourse on drag queens and the grotesque body within his films. The monstrous look that is readily identified with Divine is a creation of the makeup artist Van Smith, the veritable "ugly expert". Smith was able to create a look that would be an exaggeration of the exaggeration that is drag. The previous discussion on drag queens transcribed the issue of gender performance and aspects of male homosexuality, drag as it is commonly portrayed is often a role for young, lithe men who can easily transcend into the role of the feminine. Divine, has neither the body shape nor the look, thanks to Van Smith, of the typical drag queen. This is one of the main reasons why her image is so easily recognized in contemporary culture. Drag in and of itself is readily camp, Divine and her role as queen adds the secret ingredients of the abject and the grotesque body to an already campy construct. Waters', the man who gave Divine her name, propelled her to fame. *Pink Flamingos* showcased Divine as a fugitive, a rather grotesquely glamorous woman living on the lam in backwoods Maryland. The grotesque body as described previously has many interesting attributes including bulbous bodily dimensions, which Divine's 300 pound frame had in spades. Also, there is also that element the Romantic Grotesque as discussed in the Bahktin book, of which the body is no longer a free flowing entity, but a closed off structure with limited entrances and exits. In Bahktin we also encounter the topic of Carnivale which can be tied into the spectacle, or rather drag as spectacle. Divine, used this notion of the spectacle to get herself noticed, and this carnivalesque look, one of abject performance is how she is best known. We see this in the grotesque body of Divine, who heightens her absurdity with tight fitted dresses and
discussions of orifices that she does not possess. She creates a spectacle wherever she goes, and this was noted during the filming of Pink Flamingos. Her body is one of closure, of which only the mouth and the anus provide any and all pleasure and pain principles. This is recognized in the scene, one of incestual abjection, where she performs fellatio on her son Crackers. Although, not the only use of the abject, it provides an interesting look at what the grotesque body is comprised of in an instance like this.

The drag queen, the most recognizable of all camp symbols, plays an important role in the work of John Waters, considering his relationship both personal and professional with the talented "beauty" Divine. Divine was undoubtedly a comedic drag queen, she loved to perform for her audience, which grew with each new Waters' film. The comedic drag queen, as previously mention is the venue for those queens who are either less experienced or not aesthetic enough to be glamorous. It seems however to be the perfect venue for Divine. By the end of Waters' film Multiple Maniacs, filmed in 1970, Divine had quite a following in the drag community. But, this particular beauty according to Waters' was not "a transvestite nor a female impersonator...simply an actor who is usually cast as a woman."111 According to John Waters, "Divine seemed comfortable living his 'interpretation of a man' and said he is quite satisfied with his natural 'plumbing'."112 The way Waters employed and exploited the natural drag proclivities of Divine is only part of the genius that went into his films. Waters the mastermind, and Divine the willing participant. Divine's incarnation as a woman is the template for the grotesque body, which is the proprioitor of most of the representations of the abject. Waters' and Divine wanted to shock, and shock they did, Divine's look and
Waters' fascination in exploitation films, helped to create the drag queen "monster" commonly known as Divine.

Waters' and his friends were all denizens of Baltimore, Maryland and almost all of the hailed from the suburban neighborhoods. This is only the first tie to Baltimore, but Waters' has such a high connection to his home turf, that he thrives in its unique environment. At first, his use of Baltimore seemed like more of a budget requirement, but as time and his work progressed he began to see Baltimore as the originator of his voyeuristic and scopophoric impulses. Many of which were seen in his 1999 film Pecker. Pecker, the main character is a rough amalgamation of Waters himself. Once again, this film was shot in Baltimore, and many of the experiences showcased in the film were directly taken from the life of Waters himself. Pecker's best friend Matt, is a kleptomaniac in the film, a role that was not far removed from Waters’ himself. Divine, while shooting Pink Flamingo momentarily delved into the art of shoplifting, stealing two canvas director’s chairs covers, and later a couple slabs of meat, the very thing he stole in Pink Flamingos.\(^{113}\) In Chapter Three, Pecker is used to illustrate Water's own fascination with Baltimore, his everyday activities and events from his past are tied into the storyline. Pecker, like Waters' gains his inspiration from Maryland's "Charm City." Through the life of Pecker we are able to identify the voyeur in each of us, all the while exploring the seamy side of Baltimore, one that adds to Baltimore's unique charm. There are quite a few references to the gay community in this film; The Fudge Palace and The Pelt Room being the most visible. The topic of the grotesque body does not fit in this film, in the ways that one would naturally perceive, but he manages to show the
grotesque in humanity as a whole. The cultured New York crowd is the best example of this; they were fascinated first by Pecker's images of his friends and family, but when their own images were those being scrutinized they did not feel so comfortable. Pecker managed to knock them off their respective pedestals by highlighting and exploiting their flaws. Here it was the behavior that was shown to be grotesque. The body played various roles in this film, first there were the main characters, but the ancillary characters in the strip joints have more body to focus on, the focus on sexualized behavior that is there to entice, and in some cases possibly repulse the audience. Waters' artistic path runs a reverse parallel to Pecker's; he started his career as a director and later became a photographer, a photographer with a unique perspective. Pecker, on the other hand, started as a photographer, using a second-hand camera that he got at his mother's thrift store. Each of the two artists explore their surroundings, and document what they encounter, the more absurd the better. Each of the two artists seek to shock, exploit, and repulse, in a good way, their audience.

Waters' photographic serial *12 Assholes and a Dirty Foot*, is an assemblage of various pornography images, set up to focus in on the male asshole. This is a great example of how he rearranges images and thus changes their meaning and the way in which the audience reacts to it. In Chapter Four, I discussed the serial and how it relates to homosexuality and practices commonly perceived to be abject and filthy. Disease was another important topic that was touched on in this chapter, with this there was a large focus on AIDS. With such a large gay community it would be safe to assume that John Waters' at least knew someone who died of the disease during the crisis of the eighties.
and nineties. Although, the topic of AIDS does not rear its head in any of the works I have focused on, it is important to note due to its prominence within the gay community, especially gay men. Waters' does play on the performative aspect of homosexuality, much like the performative aspects of gender seen in the world of drag. The subjects of this work, have no identity, they are nude and open for interpretation, an interpretation of the placement of homosexuality in the dominant culture. He plays on the notion that homosexuality is filthy and disgusting, a taboo cultural element. There is also a brief mention of the criminal aspects of homosexuality, and its move from psychiatric disease to a life choice. The idea of filth, the abject, and the performance of the sexualized body, grotesque and otherwise all run through the course of his work. His is a genre meant to shock and disgust, but he manages to do so without losing his grasp on everyday culture.
5Ibid., 7.
11Ibid., 6.
16Ibid., 100.
19Ibid.
20Ibid., 101.
21American Heritage Dictionary, s.v. “Catharsis”.
23Ibid., 3.
24Ibid., 71.
25Ibid.
26Ibid., 149.
28Ibid., 336.
29Ibid., 306.
30Ibid., 306.
31Ibid., 311.
32Ibid., 39-40.
33Ibid., 7.
34Ibid.
35Ibid., 11.
36 Ibid., 8.
37 Ibid., 11-12.
39 Ibid., 40.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 69.
49 Ibid. 125.
50 Ibid. 43.
53 Ibid. 57.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Ibid., 219.


72 Ibid., 80.

73 Ibid., 80.


76 Ibid., 97.


78 Ibid., 76.


88 Ibid., 550.

89 Ibid., 551.


91 Ibid., 48.


93 Ibid., 135.


106 Ibid., 552.
109 Ibid., 2.
110 Ibid., 13.
111 Ibid., 145.
112 Ibid., 145.
113 Ibid., 11.
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