

QUEER DYSTOPIA:

An exploration of the relationship between camp culture and capitalism in John Waters' "Trinity of Trash."

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Signed: Olwen Yappa

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Abstract:

The evolution of modern capitalism has continually subjected queer culture to exploitation, misrepresentation and commodification based on a misguided belief that the nature of queer expression is formulated strictly within material aestheticism. Consequently, as capitalism intensifies it further hinders queer representation. Thus true queer representation cannot exist under capitalism.

This thesis examines the theories of queer utopianism from numerous philosophers including the originator of the concept of utopianism, Sir Thomas More as well as more modern, queer-focused theorists such as the author of *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz. I have studied these different approaches to utopianism through a Marxist lens employing speculative analysis of the exploitation film series, "The Trinity of Trash" by director John Waters. Through my exploration of the themes within these films, including the relevance of their cultural influences I believe that the anarchic portrayal of queerness within this trilogy to be examples of queer utopianism. My argument is that queer representation of the past and present is so often restrained by capitalism. It has been regulated, commodified and sanitised; it is queer dystopia.

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Introduction: A History of Queerness under Capitalism.

Exploitation cinema is a genre of film that draws its audience through its inclusion of taboo subjects, usually explicit sexual activity or extreme violence. The exploitation film genre was a crucial development in cinematic history. It is credited as being one of the forefathers of indie cinema and an essential ingredient in the shifting attitudes toward the growing censorship and capitalisation of Hollywood in the early twentieth century. Having had its true conception at the end of the nineteen-sixties with the abolition of the Hays Code in 1968, the exploitation film grew from seedy underground clubs and sex cinemas to a prolific and influential genre in its own right. Filmmakers such as Stuart Rosenberg (*Amityville Horror* 1979, *Voyage of the damned*, 1976) or Tinto Brass (*Caligula* 1979, *Dropout* 1971) endeavoured to produce the filthiest, most X-rated imagery they could muster to satiate the increasingly hedonistic nineteen-seventies viewer. The exploitation film, in its essence, is completely paradoxical in that it is anti-capitalist but pro-consumption. Its inclusion of taboo and shocking imagery purposefully makes the genre unmarketable and keeps it underground while simultaneously drawing audiences to its features. However, instead of the capitalistic approach toward filmmaking, exploitation film employs spectacle fetishism rather than “commodity fetishism” (Marx, 163).¹

Perhaps one of the most prolific figures of exploitation cinema is director, writer and artist, John Waters. Aptly nicknamed “The Pope of Trash” - William Burroughs, Waters has in recent years become a well-loved figure with films such as *Cry Baby* (1990) and *Hairspray* (1988) becoming beloved cult classics and his appearance on the Emmy award-winning Simpsons episode *Homer's Phobia*, (1997) solidifying him as an icon of camp culture. However, Waters was once one of the most viscerally challenging underground filmmakers of the nineteen-seventies with his earlier films *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974) and *Desperate Living* (1977) spanning across the most exploitative decade of film history. This trilogy of film projects created primarily by Waters with his collection of friends, otherwise known as The Dreamlanders was deliberately created to shock and disarm audiences, to be some of the most unwatchable films in cinema history. Waters referred to these three films as “The Trash Trilogy” although

¹ **Spectacle Fetishism:** Here I am referring to the almost fetishistic treatment of the spectacle in exploitation cinema and the obsession it has with shock value over commercial gain. Exploitation film is more concerned with the reaction the audience have to its spectacle fetishism than how much money the film can make as a commodity.

Commodity Fetishism: This of course is referring to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism referring to production and exchange as relationships to things rather than people, which is touched upon in *Capital* 1885.

they would later become known to fans as “The Trinity of Trash.” While the trilogy is purposefully contentious it has become a staple of queer cinematic history, completely steeped in camp culture. It is important to note here that while there are definitely purposeful anti-capitalist themes in Waters’ films many of the themes I will be discussing are underlying. The trilogy is a series of primarily nonsensical comedic films, however, the presence of the themes I will be discussing are no less important. Waters makes movies for the underdogs of society, for the community by the community. Thus it is what the community draws from the films that makes them so relevant.

The origins of the link between homosexuality and frivolous expenditure are touched upon by Author David Bennet in his 1999 essay *Burghers, Burglars, and Masturbators: The Sovereign Spender in the Age of Consumerism*. In this essay, Bennet speaks extensively on the correlation between consumerism and sexuality. Exploring the origin of the association between venereal desire and material desire and the origins of this psychological connection as well as the effect sexuality plays concerning the habits of the consumer; Bennet draws from Freud's theory of the “pleasure principle” and the “Economics of the libido” (Freud, 6). These are theories that draw on ideas regarding primal urges not being strictly limited to sexual impulses but equally to material impulses, with the act of spending perceived as being a sexual act. Freud delineates in *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, Volume II* (1908-1910) “Uninvested capital, so to speak, burns a hole in one's trouser pocket”. (Freud 563). Bennet touches on this and further explains that (It might also burn a hole in the seat of the trousers.)” (Bennet, 283), equating the release one might feel when spending to the release felt during orgasm. Other psychiatrists of the time, including Krafft-Ebbing, relayed the concern that nineteenth-century society was truthfully more consumed with, as contemporary sexologist Thomas Laquer puts it “the pathological powers of the imagination, rather than as arising directly from the correlation of semen” (Lacquer, 126, 121.) Meaning that these theories regarding the similarities between sexual gratification and monetary gratification were likely merely based on nineteenth-century societies’ prudent attitude toward both sex and expenditure. Furthermore, these studies stress a particular interest in not only the relationship between sexual impulse and materialism but a keen fascination with frivolous spending and waste linking this to queer sexual expression.

The age of sexual psychology had its awakening in the nineteenth-century, a period marked by its fascination with industrial progress and an obsession with the advancement of mankind. The concept of frivolous spending and consumption at this stage was perceived as a negative quality, a “debilitating drain on the economy of the working body” (Bennet, 277.) Evidently, there was growing anxiety toward concepts of self-ruination leading to de-evolution in the collective consciousness. Bearing these anxieties

in mind, it is not surprising that philosophers such as Georges Bataille began to directly link what was perceived to be the para-sexualities of the time with crime and sexual ruination. It was during the nineteenth-century that theories regarding masturbation or “onanism” as it was referred to then, became associated with self-abuse, narcissism and homosexuality.² The practice of masturbation was viewed as a weakness, a waste of life and potential, which as aforementioned was one of the great sins of the nineteenth-century. It was also believed to lead to homosexuality as finding pleasure in one’s own body was considered a homosexual act. Here we see the beginning of the association between homosexuality and Capital.

These nineteenth-century rhetorics of course leached into early cinema and consequently queer representation during the Hays code-regulated years. One of the defining regulations of the Hays code was a complete ban on anything that could be perceived as a representation of deviant sex. This of course not only involved displays of heterosexual sexual relations such as having married couples displayed in separate beds or indicating romantic kisses by panning the camera down and having the woman lift her foot. This also accordingly applied to homosexuality, not only homosexual sexual activity but the portrayal of homosexuality itself. Nevertheless, homosexual characters still existed within Hays code-regulated cinema but were heavily coded. These coded characters were known as Sissys. Since the Hays code spanned throughout most of the nineteen-thirties and all of the nineteen-forties, only ending in 1952, representations of masculinity in post-code films were heavily influenced by the depression and second World War. This was a time in which a man’s masculinity was based on his ability to find work and be a patriotic, disciplined soldier. As a result, depictions of homosexuality, more precisely homosexual men were portrayed as the antithesis of this, depicted as foppish, cowardly, lazy, frivolous with money and dressed flamboyantly. Sissys were often a source of comedy in early cinema and so audiences of the thirties and forties began to associate early representations of camp with comic relief. Homosexuality was not only a source of disgust but a source of ridicule. This archetype of queer representation is known as queercoding and can even be identified in some contemporary media for example “Scar” from *The Lion King* (Allers, Minkoff, 1994) possesses notably Sissy-like qualities. Some examples of famous Hollywood Sissy characters include Franklin Pangborn and Clifton Webb. The inclusion of Sissys during the Hays code furthered the link between queerness and frivolous materialism. Since queer people’s representation was being performed for them by non-queer people, the style was often reclaimed by queer people as the only acceptable means of camp expression by heterosexual standards.

² **Onanism:** The word referring to masturbation was derived from the story of Onan in the book of Genesis.

In his 2014 essay *Doing it Yourself*, Micheal Maisels discusses the concept of materialism and homosexuality and the furthered correlation between the two within a mid-twentieth-century context. Maisels reviews past studies of onanism and narcissism and expresses their relevance in relation to the pop art movement of the nineteen-sixties. This movement is arguably one of the great queer-centric art movements of the mid-twentieth century and an obvious paradigm when discussing the evolution of consumerist culture and its presence in queer art, due to its fascination with the commercial. This was coupled with antagonistic articles such as Thomas Hess's *The phoney crisis in American art* (1963) which obsessively compared queer art to the street-walker stating that in the same way, sexual acts received from a sex worker are considered to be lacking in authenticity and intimacy, commercial art/pop art also lacks authenticity. Perspectives such as this serve as further insight into the cultural developments and correlations between queer sexuality and artistic expression with commercial materialism.

Writer Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* written in 1964 recognises camp as a queer-orientated aesthetic and expresses that perhaps the reasoning for this is that "camp and aestheticism is a way of acceptance" (Sontag, 12). Sontag's view is that camp culture for queer people is an avenue in which to make queer culture and lifestyles more palatable. The book is a series of fifty-four notes on Sontag's personally identified characteristics of camp, which she believes define the culture. These notes read almost like a rulebook for camp, leaving little space for argument. Among some statements within these notes, Sontag defines camp as being a solely materialistic art style, stating that camp finds its home in the unnatural; "nothing in nature can be camp" (Sontag, 3). Sontag further delineates that "The Hallmark of camp is extravagance" (Sontag, 7) further expressing, contrary to this point, that camp has a fascination with forgotten and outdated aesthetics and the glamorisation of this is what can make vulgarity, camp. Sontag further proposes that while camp can be vulgar in its disregard for style fopaux, it is ultimately too "naive" to express true vulgarity. Camp can never be gritty or self-aware as, "camp which knows itself to be camp, is usually less satisfying" (Sontag, 6). While Sontag's notes are in some instances superficially correct, in terms of more outdated camp media, I believe that queer expression has evolved into a far more complex culture such as is displayed in "The Trinity of Trash."

Sontag's notes on camp are restrictive in comparison to the camp media that succeed them. These notes are firmly rooted in a mode of camp that retains loyalty to a far more high-brow culture, outlying from the bourgeois academia of Wilde's "dandyism" (Sontag, 11) which might be found in *Phrases and philosophies for use of the young* (Wilde, 1894).³ "The Trinity of Trash" contests these outdated forms of

³ **Dandyism:** here Sontag is referencing the dandy who is a traditionally upper class man that takes great pride in their appearance..

camp representation and is undoubtedly and unapologetically low-brow in comparison.⁴ The nature of camp according to Andrew Ross is "when the products [...] of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to produce and dominate cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste" (Ross, 312). Camp is a style that is constantly being reinvented, borrowing from past manifestations and reinvigorating itself to create a whole new beast. This is ultimately where camp gains its charm. Therefore subjecting camp culture to such a regimented code is redundant. While camp is fond of reinvention, it is not rhetoric. Rather, its whole business is to degrade past ideals, even if these ideals belong to the culture itself. This is evident in Waters' trilogy as it both borrows from past camp stylisations such as Sontag's notes and reinvents new avenues of queer expression.

Here I will incorporate Gramsci's theory on hegemony in my argument. Antonio Gramsci theorised in his prison writings (1929-1935) that hegemony is the practice in which the ruling class gains dominion over the working class through unconscious consent⁵. In this scenario, Sontag's notes on camp as I have previously stated, represent the high-brow culture of the bourgeois media of the golden age of cinema (1920s-1960s), while media such as "The Trinity of Trash" represent the low-brow media of the proletariat such as indie film companies of the 1970s. Just as political rhetoric can be presented to and adopted by the proletariat through hegemony, so too can the pomposity of high-brow camp.⁶ Traditional, post-Stonewall camp portrays queer culture and queer people as something artificial and materialistic; something to be capitalised upon. In a modern sense, we see this with "Rainbow Capitalism" (Ramírez, Horatio, 175–197.), in which corporations against the interest of the queer public project a materially focused view of the queer community.⁷ They not only capitalise on queer people with little thought toward their issues and history but also perpetuate a false idea of what it means to be queer, mutating camp aesthetics from flamboyant expression to vapid displays of material wealth.

A contemporary example of this is *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (Murray, 2009). While *Ru Paul's Drag Race* initially began as a way to showcase the underground art form of drag and bring a level of respect and legitimacy to its performers, the enormous popularity and consequential commodification of the show has

⁴ **High-brow vs Low-brow:** High-brow media is media that is considered to be of higher intellectual value as opposed to Low-brow media that is not considered intellectual or cultured. Waters himself has proudly described his work as low-brow.

⁵ **Unconscious Consent:** This refers to the idea within hegemony that the proletariat give unconscious consent to be governed against their own interests under the guise that there is no alternative.

⁶ **Proletariat:** The working class.

⁷ **Rainbow capitalism:** Portrayals of the LGBT culture in the interest of capital.

eventually managed to hinder queer representation through its vast oversaturation. While *Drag Race* is not innately problematic in a conceptual sense and its ability to create careers for queer people through the monetisation of queer art forms is inevitably the best-case scenario in regards to living as a queer person in a capitalistic society. The over-saturation and commodification of the show has led to an inability of other queer representation to penetrate the media to the same effect. Shows like *Drag Race* have created a linear portrayal of cisgender male queerness and subsequently hindered other queer media that addresses pressing queer issues such as transphobia, bisexual erasure and struggles with child custody. This over-representation of a single form of queer expression is then in turn consumed by younger queer generations and perceived as a necessary and valid element of queer identity, which ultimately creates a cycle of consumption further perpetuating this indoctrination. *Drag Race* is the result of the hyper-commodification of queer culture. The materially focused high-brow camp such as Sontag's notes or Ru Paul's *Drag Race* hegemonically portrays queer culture as vain and capitalistic. *Drag Race* is queer media that is acceptable by straight standards, the perfect vehicle for rainbow capitalism. While "The Trinity of Trash" incorporates a lot of similar elements to *Drag Race* such as the presence of drag queens and flamboyant costuming it employs a notably more anti-capitalist approach.

In writer and queer theorist José Muñoz's exploration and chronology of queer utopianism *Cruising Utopia 2009* he denotes the rise of Gay pragmatism in regard queer futurism as the "erosion of gay and lesbian political imagination" (21), further stating that utopianism itself is "not-quite-- conscious" (28)⁸. Pragmatism in this instance refers to the desire to carve out political equality for queer people whilst adhering to the constraints of capitalism. My supposition is that the space between the consciousness of utopian philosophy and the liberation movement of post-Stonewall queerness that is stifled by late-stage capitalism is queer dystopia. The hegemonically-- fed- capitalism- dependent mode of queer representation in contemporary media within the "ruins of late-stage capitalism" (Rebentisch, 239) is a dystopia that disturbingly mimics pre-Stonewall, mid-Hays code camp, once again dismissing the working-class queer community. John Waters' anti-camp approach in "The Trinity of trash " explores an anti-hegemonic representation, which, through its far more working-class orientated brand of low-brow camp, propagates utopian philosophy within a distinctly dystopian setting. In this dissertation, I will be discussing the importance of the validation of the utopia portrayed in John Waters' film series "The Trinity of Trash" highlighting, that the unmarketability of radically anti-capitalist portrayals of queerness may be an alternative to queer dystopia.

⁸ **Queer Pragmatism:** Queer Pragmatism refers to the movement of modern queerness and its focus on successfully existing within heterosexual, capitalist society.

Chapter one: “*Pink Flamingos*”: Performing Utopianism amidst Queer Dystopia.

Contrary to Sontag’s notes on the characteristics of camp, Waters’ “Trinity of Trash” is not only unconcerned with an “integration into society” by “promoting an aesthetic sense” (Sontag, 12), but is at times so vulgar that it is comically unpalatable and therefore a direct subversion of this supposed camp template. Although Sontag’s notes are not directly affiliated with Waters’ work, her defined characteristics of camp appear directly within each film. However contrastingly, these characteristics do not align with the linear depiction Sontag portrays in her notes and instead play out almost as a double parody of themselves, both borrowing from and subverting the classic tropes of camp. Through the use of exploitation cinema, Waters highlights these subversions through the film’s fascination with sensory materialism, performative controversy and a general preoccupation with murder, paraphilia and filth⁹.

In this chapter I will be discussing the first film of the trilogy, *Pink Flamingos* and more specifically how *Pink Flamingos* demonstrates how Waters has reappropriated traditional high-brow camp paragons in an anti-hegemonic fashion, in a world not of queer utopia but queer dystopia. While I have established queer dystopia in reference to contemporary media, in this chapter I am referring to the queer dystopia of pre-Stonewall representation and how *Pink Flamingos* performs queer utopianism amidst the aftermath of the Stonewall riots.

Pink Flamingos is by far the most abhorrent instalment in the “Trinity of Trash”. The film is primarily set in a trailer park outside Baltimore and follows the story of wanted fugitive Babs Johnson (Divine), her “mentally ill” mother, “Delinquent Son” Crackers and “trusted travelling companion”, Cotton in their cutthroat battle with Mr. and Mrs. Marbel to become “the filthiest person alive” (Divine, *Pink Flamingos*). Fittingly, the film project itself was made with the key objective of being one of the most unwatchable and unmarketable films in cinema, with Waters himself stating in an interview with Thelma Adams that the draw of *Pink Flamingos* was its scandal, the ultimate display of “what if my parents saw this?” (Waters, 41). This goal was most certainly achieved with the film including depictions of incest, rape and other degenerative acts such as the closing scene, infamously depicting Divine ingesting Dog faeces.

My Argument here is that Waters’ low-brow approach in these films is representative of the queer working class not through its content but through its intent. Waters uses the classic exploitative film

⁹ **Sensory Materialism:** Here I am referring to how material possessions can evoke joy and importance not by covetousness or status alone but through the joy of the sensations they evoke. *Pink Flamingos* uses dramatic colour and costume not as a display of wealth or glamour but to evoke sensory pleasure. It is utopia within material possession.

Performative Controversy: This is in reference to the performative shock value purposefully used in exploitation cinema. It is performative in that the act itself is used alone for its shock value and not because its creators necessarily agree with it.

technique of Cinema Vèritè (Truthful Cinema).¹⁰ This is an originally French cinematic technique that when applied in an exploitative context highlights the controversy of a certain topic or scene by having the act itself be genuine, for example the lead actor Divine genuinely ingesting dog faeces (which has been confirmed by Waters himself) for the final scene. *Pink Flamingos* uses this confrontational technique to lash out against high-brow culture, not because these degenerative acts in any way represent working class queer communities but because the inclusion of them in the film allows the elements of the film that are inherently queer to be un-marketable and therefore they cannot be re-marketed. The inclusion of these controversial scenes protect the authentic queer expressions hidden within the vulgarities of the film. This is what cements the film as a cult classic, beloved by the queer community. Although *Pink Flamingos* is certainly the most shocking and at times difficult to watch of the trilogy, it remains undoubtedly camp and light hearted. The inclusion of taboo themes such as explicit sex and violence break apart the hegemony of queer representation that the audience is familiar with. *Pink Flamingos* is not merely queerness for comic relief but is both violent and funny simultaneously. It is stylish and ugly, explicit and ridiculous both subverting queer stereotypes and rejecting the idea that queer people must uphold a positive image at all times for the sake of heterosexual acceptance.

The world of *Pink Flamingos*, like the philosophies of queer utopianism rejects the binary, material fetishism of pre-Stonewall representation. However, unlike the queer utopian philosophies of philosophers such as José, Esteban Muñoz or Sir Thomas More, *Pink Flamingos* does not draw on projections and ideals of an optimistic utopic future but rather presents to us an alternative universe, one in which its protagonists are “people who could never never win in real life” (Waters, Ives, 69) The wasteland that is *Pink Flamingos* is far from desirable; it presents to us an irrevocably non-consumable lifestyle. It is a lifestyle that undoubtedly bears a resemblance to utopianism through its refusal to adhere to “straight time” (heteronormative society) (Muñoz, 24) yet much like all exploitative cinema it is staunchly unmarketable, unable to sell an idea of queer pragmatism because it cannot sell anything. As I have previously stated queer utopia is a philosophy without actualisation. According to Muñoz utopia is not a “dismissal of the here and now” (Muñoz, 22) and instead the presence of utopia is both a “self consciousness and obliviousness”, “the effective disjuncture of being queer in straight time” (Muñoz, 24). In this chapter I will be analysing this bizarre actualization of utopian philosophy amidst the post-Stonewall dystopia of *Pink Flamingos*.

¹⁰ **Cinema Verite:** Is traditionally a documentary film technique developed by philosopher Edgar Morin and filmmaker Jean Rouch from the theories of Dziga Vertov (Soviet director). Its purpose is to reveal hidden truths within reality through use of improvisation. In exploitation cinema this technique is used when a controversial scene genuinely happens, the shock value of the act revealing underlying truths about society. For example a sex scene in which the actors engage in consensual sex on screen rather than a sex scene that has been faked confronts the audience's views on sexuality and nudity.

Sontag states “nothing in nature can be camp, camp is an artifice of style” (Sontag, 3). In a sense Sontag is correct in this observation. Camp does tend to gravitate toward an artificial aesthetic and so too does *Pink Flamingos*. Nevertheless it is an artifice laced with sarcasm in the film. *Pink Flamingos* in terms of aesthetic does portray kitschy, artificial beauty including its highly glamorised costuming. From Mrs Marbles’ diamond studded, cat eye glasses to Babs’ iconic fishtail dresses, the costuming reads as a collection of Camp anachronisms.¹¹ Even the film title itself conjures images of trashy, overproduced, suburban lawn decor, which we see referenced throughout the film.¹² It is important to mention that this is Waters’ first attempt at colour film, as a result much of production designer Vincent Peranio’s set and costume designs were influenced by this fact. For example lead actors, David Lochary and Mink Stole’s (The Marbles) hair was dyed hyperpigmented, almost neon shades specifically for the film. Divine’s signature



Perf. David Lochary, Mink Stole (The Marbles). *Pink Flamingos*. Dir. John Waters. 1972



Divine, performer, *Pink Flamingos*, Dreamland Studios, 1971.

cartoon-like eyebrow look, was also designed for the film, conceptualised as a mix between Jane Mansfield and Claribel the Clown, two artefacts of camp history.¹³ Although much of the design as I’ve mentioned echoes the past, it does so eerily, risen from the ashes of pre-Stonewall camp. Regurgitating these nostalgic camp elements by displaying them on such unsavoury characters confronts Sontag’s notes of camp style as well as remaining faithful to the aforementioned camp habit of “redefinition” (Ross, 312). Furthermore these elements of “artifice” (Sontag, 3) dotted throughout the film denote that the film is aesthetically focused but not materially so, unlike Sontag’s statement regarding camp aestheticism

¹¹ **Camp Anachronisms:** An anachronism refers to an object which belongs to a different time period. *Pink Flamingos* has no time period however the styling incorporates notably camp items from the past eg. Sixties beehive hairdos or thirties fishtail dresses. I would consider these to be camp anachronisms.

¹² Here I am referencing the actual pink flamingos that are placed outside Babs’ caravan

¹³ Claribel and Mansfield are camp in a more traditional sense as they incorporate traits that Sontag touches upon eg. glamour or naivety. This makes them part of camp history and so their inspiration here is an example of camp recycling.

being “outrageous”, “a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers” (Sontag, 7). The world of *Pink Flamingos* on the other hand is not interested in these articles for their material mark but instead is preoccupied with the pure pleasure of the textures and colours in a utopic manner. In this way, the film adopts a camp mentality and a notable sentimentality to the past. However this sentimentality manifests in a dystopian setting. The costuming in this film includes items that are identifiably thrifted or part of the actors own collection, in this way they evoke the handmade spirit of the queer community, which is a direct antithesis to the material lavishness of contemporary queer representation. In this era to be openly queer was a radical act within itself which usually placed queer individuals in precarious, unsafe circumstances, both physically and financially.¹⁴ To express oneself without restraint, against all odds is an act of radical performativity and an example of performative utopia in spite of one's dystopian surroundings.

As Sontag mentions in her notes, camp adopts a love for ugly unused things. *Pink Flamingos* also adopts this sentimentality, subverting it from the traditional camp depictions of high-brow glamour in films such as *The Devil is a woman* (Sternberg, 1935), which bare their camp title not only for their “demode” (Sontag 8) “outrageous aestheticism” (Sontag, 7) but for the unattainability of the glamour they display, *Pink flamingos* ' instead presents to us a world in which this glamour is not only obtainable but accessible to all, even for example the depraved or criminal such as the fugitive Babs Johnson.¹⁵ *Pink Flamingos*' costuming at first appears to be frivolous and chaotic but with this in mind we can see that there is more depth and consideration behind its artistic choices. According to David Batchelor the use of colour for pure pleasure is inherently anti-capitalist, directly opposing patriarchal industrialism within design. Much in the same way colour within design is seen as “some foreign body, usually the feminine, (...) the primitive the vulgar, the queer” (Batchelor, 23) which must be “subordinated, like a woman” (Batchelor, 23), so too is camp aesthetics both in post and pre-Stonewall camp. Camp aesthetics like colour are accepted as long as they adhere to certain outlines. They are only marketable in controlled doses. Having the film's stylisation reject not only gender norms but societal morality through characters such as Babs is an anarchic rejection of commercial camp.¹⁶ The film aesthetically presents to us a world that expresses its camp not through its striving for over indulgent, high-class glamour but through its possession of it on everyday delinquents. By not adhering to the rules of camp glamour *Pink Flamingos* rejects the dystopia

¹⁴ It is still radical to be openly queer, however commercial media, particularly in the west, mitigates this through its intense false acceptance or rainbow capitalism. At some point capitalists realised queerness could equal profit and so highlighting queer inequality in the western world is not profitable.

¹⁵ **Demode:** French for out of fashion.

¹⁶ Babs rejects gender norms because she is both played by a drag queen and the matriarch of the family. .

of capitalised queer aestheticism. A glamour supposedly reserved for the conventionally attractive and morally worthy.

Pink Flamingos is certainly preoccupied with sensory materialism, which directly contrasts with the film's equal fascination with carnality. From its multiple accounts of explicit nudity, wasteland setting and the notably exploitative technique of hand held, almost documentary style filming, it relishes the artificial while still retaining a rawness. *Pink Flamingos* more-so than the rest of "The Trinity" is fascinated with fetish and paraphilia, acts that are arguably aggressively natural, in that they play out in an uncontrolled and savage manner. Every character in the world of *Pink Flamingos* has their own personal fetish and while this is a common theme in Waters' films, it is utterly rampant in this film. Nevertheless this collection of compulsions is not a talking point of the film; in fact it is hardly ever discussed and instead simply plays out as if it were a part of everyday suburban life. In this way, Waters successfully creates a world in which the abnormal becomes normal. This once again plays with traditional camp definitions of artificiality and naturalism in camp. As I have previously touched upon Sontag's view that "Nothing in nature can be campy" (Sontag, 3) is challenged in this film. This is a subject that Juliane Rebentisch tackles in their 2014 essay on "Camp materialism" in which they state that "society itself is mediated by the creatures that form it" (Rebentisch 236). Rebentisch like myself goes on to criticise Sontag's series of notes stating that "for Sontag the connection between the two points must reduce in what she takes to be the aestheticism of the camp attitude - attitude that would turn against anything that smacks of nature and escape the political and moral demands of the present" (238). Rebentisch further surmises that camp, if taken as a serious art form, could inform our predispositions toward the natural, or rather what we define as natural within our current society, further suggesting that a re-evaluation of these ideals through a camp lens is the key to a queer utopia.¹⁷ Ultimately I agree with this statement. History is not linear, it fluctuates, progresses and regresses. Utopianism is a philosophy that does not adhere to this. It is unfair to expect a steady growth toward a utopian futurity; freedom and expression are inherently climatic.¹⁸ The

¹⁷ It is important to mention that I am not suggesting that everything in the film should be normalised or that the film in any way is a blueprint for society or should be taken seriously as such. There are depictions of rape and incest in the film and I am by no means lauding these acts I am simply stating that the refusal to censor acts such as this is not a glamorisation but a statement of reality. Unfortunately these things happen and at the time and even today it would have been unheard of to speak about them, silence equals compliance, by removing taboo we open a conversation. This is something that is very prevalent in exploitation cinema.

¹⁸ **Inherently Climatic:** Here I am suggesting that one's access to self expression is heavily based on one's environment. Queer people of the past defined their queerness based on their societal surroundings. We often judge past generations on their actions or expect future generations to progress based on our own views. However queer people are flawed people just as the rest of society and react based on societal conditioning which is not linear. To extend solidarity regarding this rather than judgement is far more empathetic and utopian.

imperfection within the film is what begins to perpetuate a utopic-like freedom within a post capitalist dystopian present.¹⁹

Although my core argument, like Rebentisch, is that camp is a mode of queer expression that also possesses a rawness, I would instead suggest that while this is an element we see expressed in Waters' work, unlike the camp to which Rebentisch is referencing, which is as they put it "camp that takes itself deadly serious"(Rebentisch 236) it is precisely the intentional humour that makes the film so liberating for the queer community. *Pink Flamingos* is fundamentally preoccupied with freedom despite adversity. The leading characters are fugitives living in a rundown caravan in a grassy wasteland and yet not only are they portrayed as the perfect American family but they also believe themselves to be. The universe of *Pink Flamingos* is not an admirable one, yet the characters remain unphased and unapologetic about this. In Babs' infamous declaration of filthiness at the climax of the film she proudly lists societal taboos that she condones such as "First degree murder" and "cannibalism" declaring "Filth is my politics, filth is my life" (Babs Johnson, *Pink Flamingos*.) The characters in *Pink Flamingos* are not good people but they don't care to be. The film laughs in the face of adversity, expressing that queerness can be utopic without utopia, can progress and regress, is moral and immoral, natural and unnatural. It is unapologetically unconcerned with either hegemonic loyalty toward traditional camp or a progression toward a queer pragmatic future. In this way the authenticity of the film lies within its constant confrontation but also its perpetual humour and unwillingness to be contained by any rhetoric or constraint.

This is a direct influence of the shift in culture from Hippiedom to the Manson Murders and the downfall of the hippie movement of the nineteen-sixties.²⁰ The film itself is dedicated to the Manson girls and Waters has stated that the trials and murders were a huge inspiration, although admitting in his interview with Thelma Adams that it was a naive inspiration at the time and that he now "looks back in horror" (Waters, "BOMB" 39). This context gives the film a decidedly crazed and uneasy feeling. For example the scene in which Bab's family throws a party is shot in a whimsical light and yet contains lewd entertainment and Bab's joyfully receiving gruesome gifts such as a decapitated pig's head. The hard to stomach depictions of horrific crimes such as murder and castration, alongside its light hearted overtones are most certainly a product of the times. It is a direct by-product of a world with both a changing attitude toward certain societal taboos, a new generation both inspired by the sexual liberation movement of the

¹⁹ **Post Capitalism:** Post Capitalism refers to the acknowledgment of the fact that capitalism has moved to a point beyond Smithian economics. This new stage of capitalism is defined by anti-competition, mass consolidation and a withering of workers rights and industry wide casualisation.

²⁰ **Hippiedom:** This refers to the hippie culture that spanned from the -sixties to early seventies.

hippie subculture and disturbed by its grim, murderous downfall. Waters refers to this shift in his interview with Adams as follows: “We were closet punks, dressed as pimp hippies' ’, “The whole movement of scaring hippies was punk”. (Waters, “*BOMB*”, 2004, 40). *Pink Flamingos* takes place within the dystopia that followed the “free love” utopianism that died with the decidedly heteronormative hippy movement.²¹

To reference Sontag again “pure camp is naive ” (Sontag, 6) Waters’ films are certainly playful, but this doesn’t mean that they are without their poignancy. It is very much relevant to mention that *Pink Flamingos* was created in the aftermath of Stonewall. With modern day pride often depicting the day of remembrance at times as a materially fetishistic party, it is easy to forget that Stonewall was not only a riot but a representation of great pain in the queer community, leaving those who lived through it both in angst and outrage.²² This was an age in which queer people were becoming less and less concerned with “promoting an aesthetic ” (Sontag, 12) to survive and more interested in protest and anarchy. Waters makes the horrific camp in his trademark exploitive style, by not only bringing the audience face to face with certain dark realities but also transforming them into something colourful, ridiculous and of course camp. Waters brings a grittiness and a validation to camp by incorporating these dark themes and caricaturing the genuinely disturbing. By using camp as both a weapon against more timid camp depictions and a vehicle for new forms of queer expression he reclaims it from high-brow heteronormative standards by making it something filthy. To quote Waters “If you can't change something, you make fun of it”, “If you can make fun of your worst night, you will survive everybody” (Waters, “*BOMB*” 2004, 25). This is a statement that is reminiscent of Sontag’s proposal that “Camp involves a new more complex relation to “the serious' ’ one can be frivolous about the serious, serious about the frivolous' ’ (Sontag, 10).

The growing nihilism of youth culture and general jadedness with the paternal generations, left behind by the failed hippie revolution led toward more explosive, violent and exploitative art styles. If we think of Stonewall as an atomic bomb then the dystopian cultural shift in which *Pink Flamingos* belongs is what was left amongst the ashes, making way for queer futurist philosophies. In order to rebuild and create new perspectives the old rhetoric must be destroyed. It is here that *Pink Flamingos* utilises the remnants of

²¹ The hippie movement was primarily focused on Anti-war (due to the Vietnam War), free love (sex outside marriage) and a return to nature, however they were quite a heteronormative group and even at times could be misogynistic.

²² In 1984 pride was switched from a day of protest to a day of celebration in light of the frequent protests held during the AIDS epidemic. At the time it was seen as a much needed break and celebration of queerness for a community in the midst of one the most horrific points in its history. Unfortunately the switch from protest to celebration became more and more common place and with the passing of gay marriage in major world countries in the twenty tens pride eventually became vulnerable to the infiltration of rainbow capitalism. Today companies like google march in pride parades rather than banners or groups highlighting queer issues. In 2019 there was a move for pride to return to its protest roots for the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots.

past camp culture and begins to formulate a counter camp culture, one that is far more interested in misbehaviour, criminality and showcasing the stories of forgotten, low-brow, less traditionally sophisticated queer lifestyles. By portraying these less traditional characters, Waters creates a freedom within the dystopia of which *Pink Flamingos* is set.



Perf. Divine, *Pink Flamingos*. Dir. John Waters. 1972

Chapter Two: *Female Trouble* and the entrapment of capitalist utopias in a queer timeline.

While *Pink Flamingos* introduces the idea of embracing the adversities of a post-Stonewall dystopia to create a personalised freedom of expression. The second film of the trilogy, *Female Trouble* explores the rejection of queer dystopia, opting instead to explore the concept of meritocracy through a queer lens.²³ Although the first film of the trilogy served as an exercise in “what could be illegal... what could bad taste possibly be ” (Waters, “*BOMB*”, 2004, 27), *Female Trouble* on the other hand takes this a step further and explores the pietism of the justice system. In this chapter, I will be discussing the second film of the trilogy, its further development regarding the margins of queer performativity and its evolution into commodity fetishism, the fetishisation of working-class aesthetics, the ethics of criminality and the impact of the shifting cultural backdrop against which the film is set, ultimately determining how all these factors further challenge the logistics of queer utopianism.

As I have previously mentioned, Sontag's notes suggest that “Camp is the spirit of extravagance” (Sontag, 7). This is a statement that I find to be fiercely emulated in the second film. Created in the centre of the nineteen-seventies at the peak of the campy, pleasure-seeking, glam rock era, *Female Trouble* epitomises the image of commodity fetishism (Marx, 163). The plot of the film alone demonstrates this, telling the tale of Baltimore-born Dawn Davenport (Divine) and her evolution from rebellious school-girl to mass murderer, all stemming from her parents’ failure to buy her “Cha Cha” heels for Christmas. Dawn later finds herself the focus of her criminally obsessed employers, “beauty Czars” Donald and Donna Dasher who choose Dawn as the modelling subject for their somewhat fetishistic “beauty experiment”, in which they photograph Dawn committing various crimes that “Tickle” their “fancy” (Donald Dasher, *Female Trouble*). The project grows in intensity until it climaxes with Dawn performing a mass shooting during a night-club act, claiming to be “crime personified” (Dawn, *Female Trouble*). The project ultimately leaves Dawn, disfigured, deranged and drug-addled. The inclusion of these themes is likely once again inspired by the shift in the queer zeitgeist at the time. This film is far removed from the grunged-out, post-hippiedom of *Pink Flamingos* and is instead completely interlaced with the glam rock and disco motifs of the mid-seventies²⁴. The film was conceived during one of the first notable mainstream movements of queer expression in the west with glam rockers such as Lou Reed and David Bowie

²³ **Meritocracy:** The concept that the elite within society are deserving of their position based on merit.

²⁴ Here I am referring purely to aesthetic motifs found within the film such as the glam rock inspired makeup or blown out hair styles that evoke early disco.

catapulting displays of camp extravagance into mainstream media. Glam rock, however, like *Female Trouble* would ultimately spiral into a cesspit of exploitative, fame-hungry, hedonism.

Pink Flamingos touches on the reclamation of camp from the dystopia of pre-Stonewall queer representation. *Female Trouble* is a study of how far the limits of queer performativity can be pushed before evolving into commodity fetishism and effectively invalidating queer performativity as an act of reclamation. The earlier camp artist, Jack Smith presented this act of performative possession as “a utopian sphere of queer potentiality” (Muñoz, 170), the reclamation of queer aesthetics from “landlordism” (Smith, Muñoz, 171) within pre-Stonewall camp.²⁵ This in Smith’s mind is a reclamation which ultimately leads toward the realisation of queer utopianism. *Female Trouble*’s inclusion of this type of performativity instead focuses on the idea of queer extravagance as a spectacle rather than an expression, firstly through the character of Dawn who is introduced to the audience as rebellious, flamboyant and style conscious. Dawn is the personification of queer performativity in this film. *Female Trouble* in its essence is a fictional biography of Dawn’s life, acting almost as a parody of the tragedy of a woman placed in dire circumstances. Dawn may be a ridiculously exaggerated character, her disadvantages trivialised and played out for comedic effect. Nevertheless, she still faces numerous hardships throughout the film. These include being forced into prostitution, mistreated by her husband, exploited by her upper-class employers, coerced into drug addiction and a victim of an acid attack. Although Dawn is injecting liquid eyeliner instead of non-fictional drugs or runs away from home because “nice girls don’t wear cha cha heels’ (Dawn’s Father- *Female Trouble*) the pipeline from misunderstood teenager to “criminal” remains somewhat recognisable, these all being parodies of queer issues, the camp retelling of queer realities. It has been established that one of the key factors in Waters’ filmmaking is that he retains a fondness for making “movies about people who would never win in real life” (Waters, “*BOMB*”, 2004). By focusing his attention on the underdogs of society, through his camp lens and portraying them as protagonists, Waters is directly lashing out against the high-brow commodification of the older camp model.

The class consciousness of the mid to late seventies is also apparent in this film. *Female Trouble* is not only preoccupied with the effects of extreme commodity fetishism (Marx, 164) and its parasitizing of queer expression, it is also interested in the relationship between commodity fetishism and the individual based on their class, as well as the fetishisation of the working class. By making Dawn the subject of the exploitation of her upper-class employers she further acts as a direct allegory for the commodification of working-class queer culture in the media. The inclusion of the Dasher’s voyeuristic fascination with

²⁵ **Landlordism:** Jack Smith’s word for capitalism.

Dawn and her criminality from their upper-class perspective personifies the older hegemony of pre-Stonewall camp media. In the same way, camp media of the past had existed under heteronormative standards with queer people's stories and representation of self being decided for them, the Dashers make assumptions about Dawn's character based on her class and in turn decide how she is perceived for her. Having them portrayed as villains furthers this critique, as well as the absurdity of their bourgeois snobbishness highlighted in instances such as Mrs Dasher fretting that "the rats might nip at my nylons" (Donna Dasher, *Female Trouble*) when she first visits Dawn's home. While *Pink Flamingos* certainly retains elements of the disdain for the older, bourgeoisie camp class, this is the first outright mockery of it in the trilogy. The Dashers are not only separated in the film by status but by aesthetic. They, of course, still uphold the same Waters brand of camp stylisation but are noticeably more old-Hollywood in their costuming. Mrs Dasher is always portrayed with white accents, bearing an almost May West-like styling. Donald Dasher, however, sports a classic Hollywood Dandy look.²⁶ This is in stark contrast to Dawn's increasingly garish camp styling that feels more authentically Waters.



Perf. Mary Vivienne Pearce, David Lochary (The Dashers), *Female Trouble*. Dir. John Waters. 1974



Perf, Divine. *Female Trouble*. Dir John Waters. 1974

This contrast allows us to identify with Dawn despite her crimes and brash personality. By separating the characters aesthetically the audience can identify the monster from the maker, despite them being involved in the same criminal acts. The Dashers' fascination with the 'horror that goes on in other people's lives' (Donna Dasher) as well as their fetishisation of Dawn as a working-class person is reminiscent of the fetishisation of the working class in contemporary fashion. Examples of this include the re-emergence of Burberry print in contemporary fashion, a style that was famously solidified as working class now being rebranded as Haute Couture.²⁷ Although Dawn is thematically partaking in the extravagance of

²⁶ **Hollywood Dandy:** In old Hollywood the dandy is very similar to the Sissy however while the Sissy is a direct allegory for queerness the Dandy may simply be a sophisticated man such as Cary Grant or even a woman such as Marlene Dietrich.

²⁷ **Burberry:** Burberry is a brand of clothing with equestrian/outdoor roots which became synonymous with the working class or "Chav Culture" in the UK after being adopted by the working class with fakes and replicas. However it later became re-purposed as

queer performativity she does so at the spectacle of a higher class, a motif that seems to regulate much of queer expression in the media both in current times and historically. Dawn to the Dashers is a fleeting fixation, her lifestyle an aesthetic for them to indulge in, she is not only the victim of commodity fetishism she is a commodity and therefore she deserves to be spent.

This alludes to the continual pipeline of the working class being deluded into a promise of social mobility, the promise of acceptance and thus utopia. Dawn through her social standing has been alienated from her potential and is now being manipulated by the promise that she is unique. Dawn's coercion into criminality through this deceit is of course presented to the audience as a hilariously camp farce but is once again a real queer issue. To quote abolitionist and educator, Mariame Kabba “survivors themselves are coerced by abusers into taking actions that are criminal actions and they then become criminalised through that cycle of violence that they’re enduring that forced them into that action in the first place.” (Kabba, 6). This is the cycle of abuse that *Female Trouble* touches upon. The death and decomposition of Dawn’s character through the film and her eventual willingness to “Die for art” (Dawn, *Female Trouble*) while those who put that very idea and phrase into her mind remain unscathed is a comment on the difference between those who are “forced into their class” (Holloway, 45) versus those who “Live within the bounds of fetishism” (Holloway, 45) and ultimately benefit from it. This is an example of the subsequent hazard of grasping for freedom or in this case queer utopia from the hands of the oppressor.

Unlike the protagonists of the first film who did not adhere to the realities of law and consequence, Dawn does. While the criminal acts portrayed in *Pink Flamingos* are displayed in a cartoonish manner in which the leading characters appear to be able to literally get away with murder, Dawn faces the full extent of reality. The credits of the film rolling



Perf. Divine, *Female Trouble*, Dir. John Waters. 1974.

over her death in the electric chair, although a grim demise, leave Dawn unphased as she views her death as the ultimate spotlight, giving permission to sell the recording of her death, exclaiming “My Life is a show.” Now devoid of her garish makeup, statement Mohawk and flamboyant dress, she is left with the only remaining form of performativity at her disposal. Dawn's death creates the ultimate spectacle of her

high-fashion along with other working class motifs, for example in FKA. Twigs' 2022 music video *Papi bones* she is dressed head to toe in burberry glam pushing a pram outside a council estate. Examples such as this feel as if they are the bourgeois playing dress-up as the working class.

life. This is pivotal as in Dawn's mind this ungraspable meritorious platform is what frees her from her social standing. The spectacle of Dawn's death confirms her conviction to "die for art" (Dawn, *Female Trouble*). Dawn will be immortalised in this spectacle, without it, in her mind, she dies an unliberated woman. As I've mentioned *Female trouble* is set against the backdrop of the dystopia of the Hyper commodified mid-seventies. An era on the precipice of hyperinflation in which the US became not only economically stagnant but also culturally stale.²⁸ Many were becoming disinterested in long-drawn-out psychedelic music that felt as if it was a remnant of a failed revolution. *Female Trouble* incorporates this mid-century disinterest with the performance of wealth in this almost cautionary tale of the effects of the commodification of people. The mid-seventies were a time in which extravagant aesthetics such as disco and glam which both have notably queer roots, were being capitalised upon without reference to their origins. While queer extravagance was presented as a liberation in the first film, *Female Trouble* punishes its protagonists for it. Sontag states that "when self-parody lacks ebullience and instead reveals (even sporadically) a contempt for one's themes and one's materials, the results are forced and heavy-handed, rarely camp" (Sontag, 6). I would argue that *Female Trouble* utilises the camp motif of extreme extravagance knowingly, as a demonstration of contempt for extreme commodification, once again emanating the strangeness of living in 'straight times' (Muñoz, 24).

Criminality is a recurring feature of the trilogy. There is a frequent fascination with the presence of law and order throughout each film with every film in the trilogy ending in a trial scene. However, *Female Trouble* is the most notable instance of this theme. Nineteenth-Century Writer D.H Lawrence speaks extensively on his suspected correlation between the criminal, the sexual and the working class. In his book *Obscenity and Pornography*, (1929) Lawrence further develops this theory by suggesting an innate relationship between crime, pornography and frivolous materialism. This bourgeois implication that not only are the working class innately more criminal but equally prone to sexual depravity and ultimately injudicious when it comes to expenditure may be a concept created in the nineteenth-century, however, it remains very much relevant today. This supposition is what *Female Trouble* ultimately expands upon in its own uniquely campy way. Dawn's descent into mania when exposed to the promise of fame or attention, is reminiscent of this ideology. In the world of *Female Trouble*, Dawn could never have achieved utopia, her fame was a farce from the outset. Dawn was identified by her employers as innately criminal due to her social class before she has committed to her criminality and this is what excites them. Dawn for the most part is not necessarily a likeable character, she is an unsympathetic mother, greedy and attention-seeking. Nevertheless, while Dawn begins the film as merely a rebellious teenager she is not a

²⁸ **Hyperinflation:** This is in reference to the Great Inflation that existed from 1965 to 1982.

crazed criminal. This exploitation forces us to re-evaluate Dawn's crimes. This is critical as it portrays Dawn as an imperfect victim. It is far removed from the queer martyr trope of contemporary queer media (eg. Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game* 2014).²⁹ Queer people in the media are often purified by their martyrdom. Queerness is allowed if the individual contributes to society, only gaining sympathy when they suffer greatly after their contributions. Queer validation must exist without the Alan Turings of the world. Dawn may be coerced into criminality but she is by no means a saint. When we realise the complexities of queerness through the realisation that queer people are indeed neither superior nor inferior but also flawed beings, we reveal freedom and a move toward utopia.



Female Trouble, Dir. John Waters. Perf Divine. 1974

In regards to the utopian horizon, *Female Trouble* identifies that if queer utopia were in fact a tangible reality, it would be impossible for it to be a utopia that adheres to the class constraints of a capitalist society. The idea of a tangible utopia is a capitalistic idea because by definition utopia is perpetually non-existent. While utopian philosophy suggests a perfect society it earnestly and unwaveringly agrees that life is far too flawed to achieve such a thing and instead utilises the idea to inspire constant social growth. Capitalism works in the reverse sense, proclaiming that these states of ultimate Shangri la can be achieved if you work hard enough. *Female Trouble* showcases an example of this dynamic on the individual by illuminating the inevitable failure of the working class character (Dawn) who yearns for the freedom of meritorious rhetorics, not so dissimilar to the illusion of fame or the American Dream. Not

²⁹. **Queer Martyr:** The queer martyr trope is a largely contemporary trope in film. It refers to queer characters in films who suffer for their queerness throughout the entirety of the film, it is perhaps a well intentioned attempt to spread awareness of queer issues however it is so widespread that it often feels as if the suffering is unnecessary and can portray queer life as joyless or lonely, queer relationships as doomed and queer people as weak and in need of heterosexual protection.

only does Dawn become “crime personified” (Dawn, *Female Trouble*) but both aesthetically and philosophically she becomes an example of the rise of commodity fetishism and the exploitation of queer aesthetics throughout the mid-seventies. The death of Dawn in the electric chair, completely devoid of makeup, hair or glamour signifies a shift away from these material entrapments and an intimation of the changes in queer representation to come.

Chapter Three: Alienation, Capitalist Realism and Community in *Desperate Living* (1977)

While *Pink Flamingos* presented a world that explored queer utopianism despite queer dystopia and *Female Trouble* explored the consequences of striving for utopia under capitalism, the third and final film of the trilogy, *Desperate Living* explores the temporal stage of pre-utopianism and the hypothetical realisation of queer liberation.³⁰ *Desperate Living* is deeply inspired by the anarchism, and revolutionary spirit of the 1977 Punk movement, a queer movement that inspired and contextualises the piece³¹. The film follows the transition of a town on the verge of collapse at the hands of fascism in its most extreme and literal form to eventual queer revolution and liberation. In my final chapter, I will discuss the topics of capitalist realism, alienation, otherness and the importance of community within *Desperate Living*, as well as discuss the realities of what utopian realisation actually means.³²

Desperate Living follows the story of the hysteric, bourgeois, housewife Peggy Gravel, who, assisted by her housemaid Grizelda, murders her husband and flees suburbia. Shortly after becoming fugitives the two stumble upon the town of Mortville, a fictionalised village situated somewhere near Maryland. They quickly discover the town is governed by a totalitarian monarch, the tyrannical Queen Carlotta who delights in tormenting the encumbered peasants that reside within. The film follows the lives of the inhabitants of Mortville and their growing disillusionment toward their figurehead. While all of the films in "The Trinity" end with a trial scene, this film escalates into a climatic takedown of the Monarchy, which culminates in the killing and eating of the Queen, leaving Mortville "At last a free City" (citizens of Mortville-*Desperate Living*.) *Desperate living* is decidedly more politically charged than the other films of the series, including a noteworthy shift in the approach toward the casting of the film as well as the direction of the subject matter. Most notably it is the only film in the series not starring Divine as the lead female role. Instead, Waters replaces the iconic drag queen with a notably more diverse cast. This host of characters includes the bisexual Muffy who has fled her neglectful husband and dark past, her partner Mole a transgender man who perpetually struggles with his gender identity throughout the film, as well as the first person of colour included in the series so far, Grizelda. This more outwardly diverse range of characters is hardly surprising as the film was made in 1977 at the height of punk rock and the heat of the second wave of feminism and is deeply influenced by yet another shift in alternative culture and queer

³⁰ **Temporality of Pre-Utopia:** Since utopia is a state which is temporal and refers to worldly affairs . By temporal pre-Utopia I am referring to the real life actions that must be undertaken before utopian philosophies can thrive.

³¹ Punk is not traditionally defined as a queer movement however due to its anti-fascist focus I would include it as one.

³² **Capitalist Realism:** The idea that there is no alternative to capitalism, which is discussed at length on page 31

thinking. The film of course incorporates anti-establishment themes such as the mockery of authority and the bourgeoisie, with scenes in which the police of Mortville degrade themselves in numerous strip teases at the request of the Queen.

As stated in the introduction of this chapter, *Desperate Living* deals with themes of otherness which is reflected in the anarchic aesthetics of the film. As I've mentioned *Desperate living* is hugely inspired by



Perf. Susan Lowe, (mole)
Desperate Living. Dir John Waters. 1977



John Lydon "Johnny Rotten" Formally lead singer
of the Sex Pistols.

the emergence of the nineteen-seventies punk movement and was even originally titled "A punk story." As a result, the film adopts punk's flare for the ironic and subversive, particularly in regards to the design of the film. I have discussed the presence of queer performativity as a means of personal utopia in

the previous chapters, primarily the idea that the exaggerated nature of performativity generates for queer people a sense of personal freedom. However, due to the often flamboyant nature of queer performativity,



Perf. Mink Stole, Liz Renay, Jean Hill, Susan Lowe. *Desperate Living*. Dir John Waters. 1977.

it has a tendency to be trivialised.³³

Desperate Living rejects this trivialisation and reveals a rather gritty and upfront view of queerness. *Desperate living* while, still categorically a comedy, is far less interested in exploring queer issues in a "Frivolous about the serious" manner (Sontag, 10) and is far less subtle or ambivalent than the previous films, especially regarding the

queer issues that are touched upon. For example when the film exhibits the genuine pain and frustration

³³ Queer self expression is often trivialised due to its camp nature. From an outside perspective it might be easy to dismiss queer art and fashion as frivolous based on its loud, colourful, flamboyant appearance however it is hugely important to queer identity. Fashion is particularly important in the queer community, it has been used as a messaging system e.g. lesbians historically wearing violets (which is derived from Sappho's poetry) or as an act of protest (reclaiming the pink triangle) or to signify gender expression.

Mole faces with his gender identity.³⁴ The film rejects the flamboyant campy approach that the previous films adopted by having the antagonist, Queen Carlotta adopt the garishly camp style. The protagonists of the piece, while still identifiably queer, express this queerness not through overt performativity but through a more stripped-back expression. Instead, our protagonists adopt darker more grungy articles of clothing, reminiscent of punk styling. In this way the more traditionally camp elements of the design feel far more out of place. For instance, when Peggy and Grizelda first arrive in Mortville they are told they must don the local apparel (Rara skirts and dyed hair). Unlike the previous films, this styling feels purposefully unnatural to the civilians. While in the previous films the characters appeared to be elevated by their flamboyant styling, in *Desperate Living* the local apparel is more like a uniform or a costume, forced upon the civilians for the Queen's amusement. It is here in which the influence of punk once again becomes apparent. Waters is highlighting through changes in styling the notion of autonomy over self-expression. The queer community has a historic attachment to self-expression through clothing, from disco to punk it is woven into the culture. Thus this artistic choice is by no means an accident.

This theme of reclamation through style is reminiscent of designer Vivienne Westwood's inclusion of bondage and lingerie elements to highlight women's suffrage and subjugation in her punk collection. During the 1977 punk movement, Westwood reserved a particular interest in styling women in bondage gear that resembled historical girdles and corsets, the only difference being that these were worn as outerwear. The reversal of this underwear as outerwear motif was a statement to directly challenge the patriarchal forces who were shocked by the confrontation of women embracing the undergarments they had historically been forced to wear in privacy. In their 1991 feminist review Carline Evans and Minna Thornton reference this movement stating "The idea of femininity was promoted by the notion of the woman's autonomous control over her self-presentation" (Evans, Thornton, 58.) The women of the punk movement utilised the oppression placed upon them through their clothing to reclaim their power. In *Desperate Living*, the locals are continuously forced to wear cheapened versions of stereotypically queer apparel against their will. If we compare *Desperate Living's* costuming to concepts that arose in punk fashion at the time we can see that the inclusion of this is not merely for comedic purpose alone but as an example



Jordan Mooney, Styled by Vivienne Westwood. Circa 1977.

³⁴ An example of this frustration is his constant reinstating of his gender identity to his partner and his disappointment with her shock and dismissal of his sex change, a decision he made not only for himself but because he believed it was the missing piece toward being seen as a true man by his partner.

of how queer expression under heteronormative standards is portrayed in the film. Thus equating clothing to autonomy of self. This idea is furthered by the inclusion of nudity within the film as an instrument of rebellion which further highlights the idea of queer ownership over expression. When the Queen demands the citizens of Mortville degrade themselves in “backwards day” (*Desperate Living*) purely for her own amusement, the nudist colony is the only community within the town that refuses to take part as they have nothing to wear backwards. This is the first instance of the running theme of alienation versus reclamation throughout the film.

As the inclusion of the nudist colony suggests, this theme of reclamation does not only represent itself aesthetically within the film. *Desperate Living* also tackles a continual theme of reclamation in regards to subjects such as bodily autonomy. For instance, when Mole and Muffy win the lottery, Moles’ first instinct is to travel to Baltimore to spend his earnings on flashy material goods and a botched sex change, only to be rejected by Muffy when he reveals his transition to her. The scene is played out satirically, but the complexities between materialism and queer identity and the idea that one can buy gender expression and bodily autonomy are rooted within this parody. This theme is further explored in relation to the police in the film. As aforementioned, the police of Mortville are satirically portrayed as sadomasochistic play

things for Carlotta.³⁵ Apart from the obvious and unspoken comment on authoritarian systems being subordinate to the government rather than supposed peacekeepers, this also appears to be an exploration of the idea of bodily commodification. Instead of attempting to buy bodily autonomy like Mole, the police of Mortville, instead sell theirs. Identities such as “police officer” and “sex worker” might appear to be the antithesis of each other but the film poses the question, what is



Perf. Edith Massey, *Desperate Living*. Dir John Waters. 1977.

truly the difference between weaponizing your body for-profit versus sexualising it? The police after all monetise their bodies to the state just as sex workers monetize their bodies to clients. This idea of the loss of bodily autonomy that appears to be prevalent throughout the film is an inherently queer idea.

³⁵ I describe the police as sadomasochistic as they are dressed in leather apparel almost identical to sadomasochistic sex costumes that you might expect to find in a leather club. Leather clubs are a notable part of lgbt culture having the police dressed this way would be a recognisable joke to any queer audience. Having the police dressed this way also implies the police are both sadist instruments of the Monarchy and masochists due to the control the queen has over them.

highlighting that members of the queer community such as trans individuals are at the mercy of the state; “To be trans is an experience bound up with economic struggle” ... “The genital arrangements of trans people is so often a source of violence against them and that is a huge and degrading impact on their very place in the social contract of capitalism” (Faye, 166). By subverting this narrative with the police of Mortville, Water’s is once again exhibiting a mode of reclamation through the joke, even if the joke is unspoken.

These new modes of reclamation not only include the people of Mortville but the visual aesthetics of the place itself. In her essay “The Dirty Class of John Waters’ *Desperate Living*” writer Giulia Palladini describes Mortville as “A camp fairytale” further describing the town as “ a slum built with garbage and found materials, but painted in bright colours and decorated like a decadent children’s playground, or a travelling circus” (Palladini, 116). The town of Mortville is just that, encapsulating the punk habit of decking out an apocalyptic setting with lashings of dayglo and satire. The town of Mortville is an example of the mentality of the times as well as an example of a physical queer dystopia. The setting of the film however is not only crucial aesthetically. The act of having the town be the first fictional setting of the series is a choice that cannot be overlooked. By having Mortville be a mythical company town of sorts it is immediately identified as unpleasant, strange or other.³⁶ In Michel Foucault’s 1986 journal “*Of Other Spaces*” Foucault outlines the concept of heterotopias; heterotopias are, according to Foucault, spaces that are somehow other, “A sort of simultaneously mythic contestation of the place in which we live” (Foucault, 24). Foucault employs the use of mirrors as an example of heterotopia. According to Foucault, a mirror is a utopia because it reflects an imagined place but can also be regarded as a heterotopia as the reflection within a mirror is a reflection of a real place. Mortville is a heterotopia, both because it is a fictional place that is rooted within reality and a mirror or representation of our own society.

The existence of places that are other can prove to become a source of community. We can see this reflected in our own society. Often the dismissal of certain groups is what leads to the building of new communities between different marginalised people. This was likely inspired by newly forming communities within the punk scene at the time. For example in Muñoz’s book *Cruising Utopia, 2009* he reflects on his youth as a queer teen in the punk scene and how the two groups began to fuse through shared circumstances. According to Muñoz “hope is not the only modality of emotional recognition that

³⁶ **Company Town:** A company town is a town that is dependent on a single business to provide the basic necessities of living, housing, employment etc. Many southern Appalachian mining towns of the 1920s were company towns eg. Homestead Pennsylvania. Although Mortville is technically a Monarchy, the Monarch’s complete dominion over every aspect of life in the town is similar to the abuse of power of the company town.

structures belonging: Sometimes Shame, disgust, hate and other negative emotions can bind people together—certainly punk rock’s rejection of normative feelings stands as the most significant example of the emotional work of negative effect” (Muñoz, 97). Muñoz furthers this idea by recalling that punk for him “made my own suburban quotidian existence radical and experimental—so experimental that I could imagine and eventually act on queer desires” (Muñoz, 105). In this way, the punk rock subculture and the queer community, two seemingly polarising subcultures, symbiotically created spaces for each other, spaces in which new communities could rid themselves of shame and alienation. Mortville is inhabited by those who have been cast off from society. Before Peggy and Grizelda enter the town they are told by a rather unsavoury police officer that Mortville is “A special town for people like you, people who should be so embarrassed about what they’ve done” (*Desperate Living*). As the film progresses we realise that this in fact is not the case and in actuality, the residents of Mortville are not societal rejects, but that society has simply failed them. They are people pushed to the precipice of capitalistic breakdown, a literal queer dystopia. It is this closeness to the extremes of fascism and complete alienation from the rest of society that allows the people of the town to ironically resist further alienation and form solidarity and resistance through their desperate circumstances.

Alienation is a dominating theme throughout the film demonstrating the subsequent power a government can obtain through the use of alienation. Karl Marx was the originator of the concept of alienation, of and between workers, as a means to dehumanise and perpetuate capitalism. Marx stated in *Capital* (1867) that “A direct consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour, from his life activity and from his species-life, is that man is alienated from other men” (Marx, 17). Throughout the film there is a degree of social segregation and alienation. The town of Mortville does eventually bind together and revolt in the last act. However, before their eventual revolution, the town of Mortville is rife with alienation. There are frequent divisions between characters and their identities for example Mole’s struggles with his gender identity as a result of his class circumstances, the division between people on a class basis with the social climber Peggy who views herself as above the rest of the citizens due to her bourgeoisie background or even the division between individuals and their bodily autonomy as touched upon with the police of Mortville. In his book “Capitalist Realism” writer, Mark Fisher discusses the idea that through alienation capitalism presents itself as the only way of life “Work and life become inseparable” (Fisher, 34) Fisher further states that capitalism has become a mandatory dystopia and through this perpetual alienation between people and their humanity, it is “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher, 2).³⁷ Fisher refers to this nihilistic acceptance of late-stage

³⁷ It is noteworthy to mention here that the inability to imagine the end of capitalism, as Fisher is referring to here, is an example of hegemony which of course Gramsci speaks about in his *Prison Writings*.

capitalism as “Capitalist Realism” which is “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.” (Fisher, 1). The consciousness of alienation under capitalism is what can also lead to solidarity and subsequently social change. When alienation and the work-life balance are pushed to their limits consciousness can begin to take shape. After all, it was the consciousness of alienation between classes, genders and races that has fuelled numerous major revolutions. This is reflected in the film's climax. When the villagers recognize their community and set aside their differences, only then do they spark the revolt. Once again the reclamation that undercurrents *Desperate Living* comes to fruition through the rejection of societal alienation. The realisation of collective experience and community despite alienation, as well as the rejection of the trappings of individualism in the final film of the series proves that only through community can the path to liberation be carved. The film proposes that the enemy of progress is individualism, self-absorption and alienation. When the people of Mortville are caught up in their individual identities, desires or egos they continue to isolate themselves, only through collective recognition do they pave the way to freedom. Although all of the films in the trilogy incorporate anti-capitalist themes this film is a beacon of hope for not only the queer community but for all individuals oppressed by capitalism. The finale of the trilogy transcends queer liberation alone and is an inspiration to all to strive for community, solidarity and resistance.



Perf. Liz Renay, Susan Lowe, Mary Vivienne Pierce, and Cookie Mueller. *Desperate Living*. Dir John Waters.1977.

Conclusion:

Utopia is a state without realisation. By definition, it is a state that cannot be achieved. Many socialists such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are in opposition with the idea of utopian socialism primarily because utopianism lacks a focus on the measures needed to achieve it. Although utopianism is essentially the antithesis of capitalism it is not impervious to its influence. Capitalism operates on the idea that not only is living under capitalism a utopia in itself but the utilisation of capitalism is in fact the only avenue to achieve utopia. In a sense we are all utopianists, we all desire a better world, unfortunately however, due to factors such as hegemony we are unable to picture a utopia outside of capitalism. To view utopia as something tangible is a capitalistic narrative, those who have only known capitalism can only imagine a utopia based on the perceived successes of capitalism. One might envision mansions, employees, a world without pain or problems, a stagnant state of perfection. This cannot exist. However a world free from capital, a world dedicated to community, equity and compassion can. This, of course, is an anti-capitalist idea because it is not profit-oriented but instead progress-oriented. Nevertheless, the closest tangible version of utopia is to inspire a society that is constantly striving for improvement, not just for the individual or the economy but for the community.

If we apply the socialist interpretation of utopia to a queer utopian narrative we can begin to understand why Waters' anarchic and sometimes even disagreeable portrayal of queer people is so relevant regarding queer utopian theory. What Waters' trilogy manages to do through its anti-capitalist depictions of queer people, queer culture, and its anti-queer pragmatism is mimic the previously outlined socialist utopian narrative of a constant desire for growth and solidarity by instead creating a constant confrontation, a constant questioning of queerness and more importantly making it entertaining. The imperfection within these films are the questions, issues and the material that queer utopianism should constantly be exploring. If queer representation only portrayed queer people as morally just, linear characters lacking in fault or fluidity or as perfect victims in need of rescue or heterosexual empathy then queer representation would continue to exist under a heteronormative narrative. The portrayal of queer people as vulnerable or completely lacking in flaws represents them as one-dimensional and ultimately living by bourgeois, straight standards. By presenting us with a variety of queer characters ranging from the lovable and hilarious to the flawed and selfish, Waters humanises them. Waters eliminates the need for his characters to atone for their queerness by not applying perfection in every other quality of their character. Through the constant reassessing and questioning of values, taboos and expectations Waters creates a utopia for the community within the dystopia of queerness under capitalism.

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