

On Advocating Cannibalism and Eating Shit:

Queer Monstrosity in the John Waters Canon

by

Paz Regueiro

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*For queers discovering their own
Frankensteinian “seams and sutures”¹.*

¹ After Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage.” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, no. 1 (1994): 237-254.

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Abstract

This thesis offers a deconstructive analysis of the queer monsters found within the canon of John Waters films relative to the sexual politics of media representation. While monsters are traditionally understood as villains within narrative media, this piece strives to depart from the harmful, negative connotation surrounding monstrosity. It explores the idea that monstrosity is constructed around the basis of a subject who is non-normative relative to their environment, while their environment is threatened by their non-normativity. Therefore, the line that the subject must cross in order to truly become a monster is the point in which their perceived threat becomes a legitimate danger to themselves or others. Throughout the history of art and literature, monsters are known to represent an “Othered” status often reflecting elements of people and cultures deemed unsavory to the hegemonically privileged subject, particularly villainized distortions of racial, sexual, or bodily difference. As such, the threat they pose to a normative regime may be a liberating one which threatens to destabilize structures of oppressive power which relegate them into monstrous figures. The very power of the monster is its ability to throw into question that which we consider possible and therefore normal; monsters rupture our abilities to categorize and compartmentalize the limits of reality.

What this project aims to explore is the intersection of monstrosity with queer culture, which is depicted to an extreme within the monstrous characters in Waters’ films. Both queers and monsters are symbolic of what queer theory conceptualizes as “a world of infinite possibility”², representing a state of interstitiality which breaches the rigid categorizations of identity and difference imposed by structures of hegemonic cisheterosexual power. I argue that cisheterosexuality in itself is only a very recent identity arising as a biopolitical fiction within the (re)productive regulatory regime of capitalism. What defines the queer as monstrous in the face of cishet hegemony is its very transgression of cishet norms of possibility, threatening to topple the structural privilege and power held by cisheterosexual people and society. The incorporation of queers into a normalizing discourse of “inclusion” through consumable representation only seeks to assimilate us into this very regime.

Waters, a gay man himself, created an extensive cast of queer monsters characterized by their inability to be normalized into cishet hegemony; they are not intended to be representative of the totality of queer reality, but they constitute an hyperbolic representation of queer monstrosity. To the queer spectator, their inherent flouting of cishet norms of morality, respectability, and palatable consumability represents the potential for queer liberation via the destruction of such discourses. This is not to say that Waters’ monsters should be understood as ideals, as models for queers the world over to mimic as an example. What they do represent is the literality of queer *liberation* precisely through our monstrous opposition to cishet hegemony.

Keywords: John Waters, queer theory, film theory, monster, Divine, Edith Massey.

² Per the *Queers Read This* pamphlet, 2.

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CONTENT WARNING:

This essay contains frightening/graphic images, mentions of homo/transphobia and gendered violence, and discussions of graphic violence and sexual assault.

I. Foreword: Notes on Becoming a Monster

I believe that much of my work is about trying to understand why I so strongly desire that which terrifies me. I love to be afraid—my earliest childhood was spent watching Tim Burton movies and peering in terror at sculptures of ancient monsters in art museums. To me, there are few sensations more pleasurable than horror; I can never seem to resist pushing myself further into the delicious, rapid surrender of a good adrenaline rush.

But when I speak of horror, I do not necessarily refer to torture, murder, or gore. I do believe they have their merits in art, but I am not delighted in my horror at them. My parents survived childhoods under Operation Condor, and I grew up in a Latin America struggling to rebuild under its legacy. This type of horror is what theorist Noël Carroll would refer to as *natural-horror* as opposed to the *art-horror* which makes use of such techniques in film, literature, visual art, and others for artistic purposes³. It does not shock me—I have seen enough people affected by torture, murder, and gore in my life to take much pleasure in its gratuitous use in, say, slasher films. (I do not by any means wish to discredit those who do; this is just my personal taste.)

When I try to get to the bottom of what I love about horror, I ultimately settle on being *unsettled*. I am utterly attracted to that which does not fit into my conception of the world, which proves to me that things are not as stable as they appear to be, that the foundations of my lifeworld can be toppled at any moment, and have been on multiple occasions. In short, I love monstrosity, which film scholar Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock so aptly defines as the state of “the thing that, from a particular perspective in a given context, shouldn’t be, but is”.⁴ One of the first

³ See Noël Carroll, “Chapter 1: The Nature of Horror.” *The Philosophy of Horror or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, Taylor and Francis, Hoboken, NJ, 2003, pp. 12.

⁴ See Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory.” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 3

times I can remember feeling monstrosity from a “movie” was when I was four years old, visiting a film installation in the Rochester Museum of Fine Arts— I happened upon a single tracking shot down the artist’s childhood street, but their former home was CGI’d to be spinning out of control. I had nightmares of my own home spinning wildly for weeks; it became the monster in question. I suppose that in part, I am the way that I am because I have been chasing that sensation ever since.

As a teenager, spinning houses and Tim Burton stopped cutting it, so I began scouring the Internet for whatever content I could get my hands on that would make my skin crawl. I watched YouTube horror like *Little Baby’s Ice Cream*⁵ or *Don’t Hug me I’m Scared*⁶ until they finally stopped making my heart race. Then, I moved onto films— *Eraserhead*⁷ was the first one to inspire me to write my own horror, and I still have various novelty “Eraserhead Babies” that my friends would teasingly gift me.



Figure A: the titular “Little Baby” of *Little Baby’s Ice Cream*.



Figure B: the “Eraserhead Baby”.

⁵ Doug Garth Williams, 2012.

⁶ Becky Sloan and Joe Pelling, 2011.

⁷ David Lynch. *Eraserhead*. Libra Films International, 1977.

One day, when I was 17, I stumbled upon a listicle of “effed-up movies”, and the one at the very top was *Pink Flamingos* by John Waters⁸. The description below the trailer—depicting flummoxed audience members calling the film “outrageous”, “the grossest thing I’ve seen”, and “just disgusting” as they exit the theater⁹—taunted me, claiming that I would never believe what the drag queen protagonist does at the very end. My then-girlfriend agreed to watch it with me, and we watched it huddled in my parents’ house off a Brazilian pirated streaming service (since it was impossible to rent on any commercial platform).

I have no idea what I expected, but what I watched was a Technicolor disaster full of unsimulated sex scenes, arson, crossdressing, foot fetishism, forced pregnancy, full-frontal nudity, human trafficking, and of course, the film’s crowning glory: the iconic performer Divine eating actual dog feces on camera unsimulated. What I also watched, however, was unquestioned gender transgression, police cannibalism, unabashedly gay people, kinky sex, a loving chosen family, and a DIY execution. *Pink Flamingos* showed me the most literal meaning of what it means to be a “flamer”¹⁰; the *cultural* meaning of “queer”, which to me indicates “a world of infinite possibility”¹¹. As a 17-year-old very determined to prove myself as a “gold-star stone femme lesbian”, I suddenly had to question precisely *who* I was trying to prove myself to, and why I had to strive so hard to do so. To me, the LGBT community was a sort-of countercultural answer to cisheteropatriarchy, but I could not come to terms with the fact that I was still trying to play by “rules” which I saw as necessary in order to be respectable as a gay person. But here was a queer who refused to succumb to such rules; in fact, he went out of his way to contradict them.

⁸ Dreamland Productions, 1972.

⁹ *Pink Flamingos* trailer, dir. by John Waters, 1973.

¹⁰ A typically pejorative term used to describe flamboyantly gay individuals (usually men), but also a pun on the trailer-fire at the end of *Pink Flamingos*.

¹¹ After *Queers Read This* zine, Queer Nation. “Queers Read This!” Pamphlet, 1990.

I realized, as I worked my way through his *Trash Trio*¹², that there is absolutely no reason that my existence has to be a practice in mitigating others' inherent discomfort about me.

And so I became a monster.

II. Introduction: Seams and Sutures of the Queer Monster

*"I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper."*¹³

-Mary Shelley, 1832.



Figure C: John Waters in 2022¹⁴.

¹² Waters' transgressive *Trash Trio* includes *Pink Flamingos* (1974), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977).

¹³ Mary Shelley via Halberstam, *The Monster Theory Reader* 157.

¹⁴ Stephen Voss. "'True Camp Takes Itself Very Seriously': John Waters at Home in Baltimore." *The Guardian*, 4 Jun. 2022.

John Waters is a monster of a 76-year-old man. Boasting titles such as “filth elder”, “baron of bad taste”, or “pope of trash”, he has made a name for himself out of his desire “to scare the world” using “a movie camera instead of deadly weapons”¹⁵. Even if you have yet to hear his name, if you have watched Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*¹⁶, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, or even the new *Chucky* installments, you know the influence of his work. Today, many know him best as the creator of *Hairspray*¹⁷, which he credits as the Trojan horse that allowed him to sneak into the Middle American cinematic mainstream and have his say¹⁸. An anecdote from his introduction to his 1995 memoir *Shock Value* provides the perfect allegory for his oeuvre in our culture:

“A few years ago, a Florida family waltzed into a video shop and decided since they loved *Hairspray* why not rent another John Waters film? Uh-oh. In later court testimony they claimed to get ‘half-way through it’ before calling the authorities. I guess they meant the singing-asshole scene¹⁹”. (Waters, *Shock Value* viii)

People tend to discover the canon of Waters’ films through Watersed-down derivatives of his work, such as the 2007 film adaptation of the *Hairspray* musical²⁰ or the Divine-inspired design for Ariel’s iconic nemesis Ursula. What this leads them to, however, is the irrevocably seedy foundation of his canon, ejecting spectators from their expectations of palatable teenage yearning and peppy rockabilly sing-alongs to a world featuring human-on-dog coprophagia (*Pink Flamingos*), lesbians having kinky anal sex in church (*Multiple Maniacs*, 1970), unsimulated

¹⁵ John Waters, “*Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste*.” Running Press, 1981, pp. 62.

¹⁶ Menken, Alan. *The Little Mermaid*. H. Leonard Pub. Corp., 1990.

¹⁷ New Line Cinema, 1988.

¹⁸ Waters, *Make Trouble*, 36.

¹⁹ Iconic scene from Waters’ 1972 film *Pink Flamingos* in which a performer entertains a crowd by flexing his prolapsed anus in time to music (*Pink Flamingos* 57:48-58:26).

²⁰ Adam Shankman, New Line Cinema, 2007.

chicken decapitation (*Mondo Trasho*, 1969), self-amputated phalloplasty (*Desperate Living*, 1977), and much ~~worse~~ more. But as a gay man featuring a cast of his queer friends, today he reflects that it was the “radical politics” of the culture they formed that were the basis of his impulse to go “looking for trouble” by representing, in a shocking, hyperbolic manner, the sleazy underbelly of queer life²¹.

Waters’ films are demarcated by the “monstrous characters”²² depicted by these individuals, as their personalities and behaviors engender the shock value that defines his oeuvre. However, these monsters are distinct from the vampires and witches of the horror genre: they are drag queens, effeminate gay men, trans and gender-nonconforming individuals, and liminal lesbians who horrify audiences with their love for homewrecking, sadomasochism, bad parenting, oral and anal sex, crossdressing, and crime. Their monstrosity hinges precisely on a queerness which is strictly oppositional to conventional standards of respectability and assimilation into any kind of cisheterosexual normativity. To look within and deconstruct the queer elements that their embodiment comprises is to reveal the ways in which he negotiates the economy of meaning represented by them within what Jack Halberstam calls the horror tradition’s “aesthetic of pleasurable fear”²³. Waters’ queer monsters demonstrate that the pleasure we can find in monstrosity is precisely based in the negotiation between desire and fear in tandem with the liberating shock of discovering that the terms of that negotiation are in flux²⁴. In his monsters’ case, the desire and fear they negotiate is that of queer liberation, specifically a

²¹ See Keaton Bell’s interview with John Waters, “John Waters on *Pink Flamingos*, *Divine*, and 50 Years of Filth.” *Vogue*, Condé Nast, 30 June 2022.

²² Waters, *Shock Value*, 98, 102.

²³ See Jack Halberstam’s reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity.” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 150-158.

²⁴ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* 24-25.

queer refusal or failure²⁵ to accede to the normalizing discourse imposed by cisheterosexual hegemonic power. Nonetheless, queer failure should not be understood as a shortcoming, but rather the art of redefining our value in a sociocultural hegemony dominated by cishet standards defining what a successful career, family, partnership, or beauty looks like under their regulatory regime²⁶. The pervading power of Waters' queer monsters is their inability to constitute what we might term "good" representation of queer individuals and culture, in other words subjects which can be redeemed in a cishet value system. To accede to such a system is to become assimilated and normalized into categories structured by binary oppositions such as good/bad, respectable/unrespectable, moral/immoral, and normal/abnormal.

My aim is to demonstrate the way in which Waters' monsters are constructed from queerness, but their monstrous modes of queer embodiment represent the rupture of the aforementioned categories, forcing us to question their validity in and of themselves. The vehicles for this argument, of course, are the inimitable divas Edith Massey and Divine, featured in all three of the films comprising Waters' *Trash Trio*. While Massey, as a cishet women, acts as a symbolic mediator whose meta-queer actions around queerness contextually engender queer monstrosity, Divine is the monstrous drag queen whose performance as such begets the in-universe or real-world opposition which defines the queer monster. My intention, therefore, is to embark on an analysis of their monstrosity based in Derrida's concept of deconstruction²⁷, which encouraged us to expose the structures which shape our version of reality, and to run towards difference instead of fearing it²⁸. At the same time, the theoretical groundwork of this thesis is inspired and founded on the work of queer theorists who engage the topics of social

²⁵ The term "queer failure" is borrowed from Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. (Duke University Press, Durham, 2011.)

²⁶ See Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004).

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

²⁸ See Jacques Derrida, "Différance". *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press Chicago, 1982, pp. 3-27.

constructivism, particularly as they relate to the monstrous difference that makes us queer. Those such as Jack Halberstam, Paul B. Preciado, Susan Stryker, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick not only pose lived and written models for survival as contested queer bodies starkly juxtaposed against a deeply cisheterosexual culture, but their methodology allows us to pick apart the sociocultural elements which construct our identities, thus revealing the significance contained within. At the same time, both Massey and Divine's monsters are distinctly women, which is why I turn to

theories of abjection and of

the "monstrous feminine"²⁹

to feminist monster theorists

such as Julia Kristeva and

Barbara Creed. Using the

developments of queer and

feminist theory in tandem

with the monstrous, I will

demonstrate how strong a



Figure D: A frame from *Pink Flamingos*, featuring Edith Massey as Mama Edie and Divine as a character bearing her name³⁰.

challenge Waters poses to a politics of queer normalization into the cishet symbolic realm by engaging the mechanisms of monstrosity to construct his characteristically queer monsters.

When I speak of monsters, I do not wish to cast a pejorative light on those deemed monstrous—monstrosity is not an inherently negative condition, nor is the monster an inherently evil being. Per the words of Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, put simply, “the monster is the thing that, from a particular perspective in a given context, shouldn’t be, but is”³¹. What characterizes the

²⁹ See Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection.” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 211–25.

³⁰ John Waters, director. *Pink Flamingos*. Dreamland Productions, 1972

³¹ Weinstock, 3.

monster is its ability to throw into question that which we consider the realm of the possible; monsters shatter our abilities to categorize and compartmentalize the limits of reality. A monster is a “harbinger of category crisis”³² in the sense that it signals a shift in the structures of our known universe. If we look into the etymology of the word *monster*, we find that it is derived from the Latin verbs *monstrare* and *monere*, respectively “show” or “reveal” and “warn” or “portend”³³. Preciado is right in claiming that monstrosity implies a condition of awakening, of change that is to come, of abjected³⁴ bodies reclaiming the right to shape the limits of their own reality³⁵. What characterizes the monster, therefore, is the reality in which it exists; its context is what defines “the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive [characters] in the story” that it breaches, thus becoming “an extraordinary character in [an] ordinary world”³⁶. Note here how the “ontological propriety” against which the monster is defined is posed by the “positive”³⁷, which is to say normative, characters that share their universe. This is precisely because the horror genre is defined by the particular affect it is named for, specifically “the affective responses of the positive human characters in the stories to the monsters that beleagueer them” which are in turn “designed to elicit” parallel emotional responses from audiences³⁸. If the monster’s role is to provoke such an “affective response”, it follows that monstrosity is constructed around the basis of a subject who is non-normative relative to their environment, such that their environment is threatened by their non-normativity. I argue that the line that the

³² See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 40.

³³ Weinstock, 2.

³⁴ Per Kristeva’s definition, “beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva 95).

³⁵ Preciado via Gus van Sant for Gucci, 2020. Note also his 2019 address to 3,500 psychoanalysts at the École de la Cause Freudienne, “*Can the Monster Speak?: Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*”, in which he characterizes himself as the titular monster.

³⁶ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* 16.

³⁷ See Carroll’s first section, “*The Definition of Horror*”, in the opening chapter of *The Philosophy of Horror*, pp. 12-42.

³⁸ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* 15, 17.

subject must cross in order to truly become a monster, however, is the point in which their perceived threat becomes a legitimate danger to themselves or others. Let us recall, however, that monstrosity should not be construed as an inherently negative condition— it merely denotes a subject's characteristically threatening non-conformity, regardless of whether or not there is truth or intention behind the threat. But when the object of the monster's threat (re)presents a normativity that is ultimately harmful, repressive, and oppressive, perhaps the threat the monster poses is a liberating one, as they suggest the possibility that our known world could expand beyond the limits employed to make sense of it.

Waters is known to place his films within the horror genre³⁹, which is certainly appropriate considering that the avowed intention of his films is to reveal to his spectators "their own ability to still be shocked by *something*"⁴⁰. Aptly, a defining feature of his films is *shock value*, a quality that takes place when the categories structuring our reality are transgressed, thrown irreparably into question. If, recalling Noël Carroll, we consider that the monsters of the horror genre model for their audiences the ostensibly appropriate response to difference, then it makes sense that his queer monsters elicit a historically polarized response from audiences. Queer spectators accept Waters as part of a tradition of "gay affirmative, anti-homophobic

³⁹ Waters, *Shock Value* 19, 222.

⁴⁰ Waters, *Shock Value* 2.



Figure E: the lesbian revolutionaries in *Desperate Living*⁴¹.

political and cultural practices”⁴² precisely because his monsters embody a subversive possibility of queer liberation through their destruction of the norms imposed by cisheteropatriarchy. At the same time, Waters has built a career on his very public battles with cisheterosexual naysayers, critics, and censors whose opposition is grounded in cishet society’s treatment of queers as villainous monsters. The monsters his films laud as heroes model attitudes and behaviors that, if emulated by wider society, would pose a radical destabilization of sex/gender categories, and so threaten the power structures comprising cisheteropatriarchy. Cishet identity is only an incredibly recent identity constructed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as what Preciado terms a biopolitical or somatic fiction⁴³. It arose out of an intrinsically colonial and capitalist need to assimilate bodies into categories that streamline processes of (re)production⁴⁴, and in its construction of a normative cisheterosexuality, it resulted in the corresponding creation of the non-normative, “queer” category. The censors who so strongly opposed the dissemination of Waters’ work function as a case study in the subjective nature of queer monstrosity, precisely

⁴¹ John Waters, *Desperate Living*. Dreamland Productions, 1977 (01:21:02).

⁴² See Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, a Little Understood Emotion.” *Tendencies*, Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 239.

⁴³ Preciado, Paul B. *Testo Junkie*. Translated by Bruce Benderson, The Feminist Press, 2013, pp. 69, 101.

⁴⁴ See Preciado’s definition of cisheterosexuality as “a politically assisted procreation technology” (*Testo Junkie* 47).

because the monsters in his films make incredibly explicit the connections between monstrosity and queerness. They labeled his films as filth and garbage⁴⁵, disgraceful, sacrilegious, and terrible⁴⁶, even going so far as to warn that his films should not be shown in any theater⁴⁷. Their opposition is grounded in what Mary Avara, the former 21-year head of the Maryland State Board of Censors, considered a “defense of [...] morality and moral duty”⁴⁸. The indulgent, queer, monstrous excess that Waters depicts is inherently contradictory to the standards of decency that these censors are tasked with protecting, and their responses pose a model for the way cishet society is shocked and horrified by the monstrosity of queerness.

Queerness is known to be woven into the monsters of the horror genre, from Buffalo Bill⁴⁹ to Chucky’s child⁵⁰, but Waters hyperbolizes it in his monsters. *Queer* in itself is an intrinsically multiplicitous word whose usage here merits a brief discussion. *Queer*, in the colloquial sense, is an adjective denoting those who experience attraction to the same gender or who disidentify with the sex and/or gender that they were assigned at birth. In the literal sense, it signifies something odd, strange, or out of place⁵¹. As a noun, it is historically a pejorative term for such people, though its reclamation beginning around the 1980s denoted those people whose anti-assimilationist queerness actively opposed the norms of cisheteropatriarchy⁵². As a verb, it indicates the destabilization of categories, an application of a framework that allows us to view something precisely as odd, strange, or out of place. For the purposes of this study, I believe that

⁴⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 89, 91.

⁴⁶ Yeager, Steve, director. *Divine Trash*. YouTube, Fox Lorber, 1998. (33:10-26).

⁴⁷ *Divine Trash* (31:01-08).

⁴⁸ Bernstein, Adam. “Mary Avara, Staunch Md. Film Censor, Dies.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 11 Aug. 2000.

⁴⁹ Demme, Jonathan. *The Silence of the Lambs*. Orion Pictures, 1991.

⁵⁰ Mancini, Don, director. *Seed of Chucky*. Rogue Pictures, 2004.

⁵¹ “Queer.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster.

⁵² Juliette Rocheleau. “A Former Slur Is Reclaimed, and Listeners Have Mixed Feelings.” *NPR*, National Public Radio, 21 Aug. 2019; *Queers Read This* 2.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of *queer* from her opening chapter of *Tendencies* (1993) is particularly enlightening and appropriate:

“[...] ‘Queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically.”
(Sedgwick 8)

The connection linking queerness with monstrosity practically goes without saying; queers and monsters overlap in the sense that they both represent “a world of infinite possibility”⁵³ precisely because they refuse to be bound by the rigidly imposed categories shaping reality. In the case of the queer monster, the reality they breach is the cisheteropatriarchal one, but in doing so they pose a threat to the power it imposes on all sexual and gendered subjects.

Nowhere is this threat made more explicit than in the canon of John Waters' films. Whereas other queer creatives sought inclusion into the rigid categories of cisheterosexual normativity in arts and culture, Waters absolutely defiled it. Put simply, “he has succeeded, almost single-handedly, in poisoning the hearts and minds of an entire generation”⁵⁴, and it is in the monstrosity of his characters that we can assess the formulation of such a poison⁵⁵. To many, the infinite possibility of queer monstrosity can be liberating⁵⁶— how many of us have chosen to lead such lives as dissidents of the sex/gender-system⁵⁷, and are all the better for it? However, the key word here is *dissident*: the queer monster poses an active opposition to the structures defining the limits of cisheteropatriarchal possibility, and as such, the liberation that it promises

⁵³ *Queers Read This*, 2.

⁵⁴ Simon Doonan, “Foreword.” *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste*. Running Press, 1981, pp. i.

⁵⁵ See Waters, *Shock Value*, 102.

⁵⁶ See Paul B. Preciado *Can the Monster Speak?: Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*. Translated by Frank Wynne, Semiotext(e), 2021; Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1994): 237-254.

⁵⁷ After Paul B. Preciado's in a 2019 interview with Betevé; likely adapted from Gayle Rubin's essay “*The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex*” (1975).

is threatening to those benefitted by such a hegemony⁵⁸. Those with the privilege of identifying, and therefore defining, monstrosity are those privileged with adherence to a hegemonically dominant cishet normativity, thus rendering them a part of their regime— as such, “monstrosity is always defined against that which is not monstrous”⁵⁹. In today’s world it is not merely cisheterosexuals who accede to this regulatory power, but queers who relinquish the *anti-conformist* nature of queerness by refuting their monstrosity and participating in the standard defined by cisheterosexual normalization. It is no privilege to watch the most respectable members of our community hold seats in an oppressive government, or head corporations guilty of hoarding wealth from our impoverished siblings. In fact, their assimilation is an affront, truly monstrous as it threatens the liberation of the most vulnerable in our community— the unhoused, the sex workers, the addicted, the struggling individuals not unlike the characters Waters puts on screen.



Figure F: Tim Cook, gay CEO of Apple Inc⁶⁰.



Figure G: Kyrsten Sinema, bisexual, independent US senator from Arizona⁶¹.

⁵⁸ See Weinstock, 20.

⁵⁹ See Weinstock’s reference of Foucault, 26.

⁶⁰ Apple Inc. “Untitled”. The Guardian, Sept. 2021.

⁶¹ Michael Brochstein, “Untitled”. NBC News, 3 Aug. 2022.

Yuvraj Joshi terms this assimilation as “respectable queerness”, a condition of queer politics in which respect is conferred via the aforementioned assimilation into cisheterosexual norms of respectability, “a system of hierarchy and domination grounded on distinctions between the respectable and the degenerate”⁶². We are encumbered by the de-monstrification of queerness as “good representation” in the media renders us consumable to spectators who abide by the respectability that participation in cishet society begets. After all, Weinstock reminds us that monstrosity is “a socially constructed category reflecting culturally specific anxieties and desires, and often deployed — wittingly or not — to achieve particular sociopolitical objectives”⁶³. When we are only conferred respect when we embody subjects who get married, hold corporate jobs, present per gendered cishet beauty norms, keep house, and the like, we risk losing the political nature of a *queerness* that seeks to dismantle the very categories defining respectable and unrespectable beings. Acquiescing to respectable queerness also carries the consequence of eroding community solidarity with our unrespectable, unassimilable queer siblings whose beings cannot be renegotiated into a distorted cishet consumability. There is a power of self-definition in being monstrously *queer*, and this is precisely what Waters’ queer monsters remind us of. In creating his monsters, he not only set out to “scare hippies”⁶⁴, but to radically challenge the representational politics of respectability imposed by the structural power of cisheterosexuality.

The cinema has long been analyzed as a regulatory tool through which those hegemonically privileged can impart their standards of normativity; much of contemporary film theory is founded upon critiques of this powerful medium, such as those written by Mulvey⁶⁵ and

⁶² Yuvraj Joshi, “Respectable Queerness.” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, 14 Apr. 2012, pp. 419, 421.

⁶³ Weinstock, 25.

⁶⁴ Waters via interview with Bell, 2022.

⁶⁵ See *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1975.

Doane⁶⁶, Fanon⁶⁷ and Diawara⁶⁸, or Solanas and Gettino⁶⁹. Mass media forms a part of culture; films form a part of mass media; both form a part of the ideological state apparatus via culture and communications⁷⁰. The cinema has a hand, therefore, in imparting the discourse of normalization because it is a medium that allows for mass dissemination of such an ideology, thus allowing for cishet ideals of the status quo to be construed as the dominant (read: true) ones. Terrible things can happen when difference is weaponized as monstrosity by the privileged normative; systems upholding the power of dominant groups can deploy monstrosity within arts and culture to offer models for how to deal with the real-world reflection of the non-normative monster so long as it is understood as a danger or threat⁷¹. This is precisely why it is so important to dissent, to resist a regulatory regime which demands our assimilative normalization into the power structures which oppress us. Who exemplifies this dissidence better than Waters, who uses the tool of cinema to impart a distinctively deviant, monstrously queer ideology on his audiences? Him and his monsters remind us that monsters are legible as a symbolic language, “a text expressing human fear and desire”⁷², but what structural and post-structural linguistics remind us is that language is contextual and arbitrary. Much like the letter *t* has no inherent link to the sound it denotes and the word *apple* has no inherent link to the fruit⁷³, monsters such as Edith Massey or Divine’s various characters — the focus of this analysis — are not monstrous in

⁶⁶ See *Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator*, 1982.

⁶⁷ See *National Culture*, 1982.

⁶⁸ See *Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance*, 1975.

⁶⁹ See *Towards a Third Cinema*, 1970.

⁷⁰ Borrowing from Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 80-81.

⁷¹ Weinstock, 19. Also relevant: Lotte H. Eisner’s discussion of Nazi German cinema under Joseph Goebbels (*The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Translated by Roger Greaves, 2nd ed., University of California Press, 2008, pp. 329), or D.W. Griffith’s infamous Ku Klux Klan film, *The Birth of a Nation*, in which Black people are villainized as the monstrous Other (Griffith, D.W., director. *The Birth of a Nation*. Epoch Producing Co., 1915.)

⁷² Weinstock, 20.

⁷³ Referencing Ferdinand de Saussure, “General Principles.” *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by Wade Baskin, edited by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy. Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 117.

and of themselves. What gives each of these their meaning is the significance which is assigned to them by the spectators consuming them in their respective contexts.

Proponents of the normalizing discourse of an assimilative “good” representation are shocked and horrified by the absurdity of their success both in and out of their



Figure H: Divine smiling through a mouthful of dog excrement at the end of *Pink Flamingos*⁷⁴.

respective narrative universes. But to those of us who exceed this normalizing discourse, their queer monstrosity signifies the infinite possibility that lies within our liberation from it.

Proponents of the normalizing discourse of an assimilative “good” representation are shocked and horrified at the absurdity of their success, both in and out of their respective narrative universes. But to those of us who exceed this normalizing discourse, their queer monstrosity signifies the infinite possibility within our liberation from it. To those of us in the know, we have no reason to be threatened by their monstrosity; it’s made of the same elements we are. When Waters lauds his monstrous divas as the most beautiful people alive⁷⁵, we can understand ourselves as part of those beautiful people, regardless of the opposition of those naysayers seeking to quash our divine, queer monstrosity into something they can consume.

⁷⁴ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (01:31:59).

⁷⁵ See Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, a Little Understood Emotion.” *Tendencies*, Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 239. I also adapt here Divine’s tagline of “*The Most Beautiful Woman Alive*” or “*The Most Beautiful Woman in Hollywood*”.

III. Edith Massey: Perversions of a Monstrous Femininity

If “beauty is looks that you can never forget”⁷⁶, then Edith Massey fits the bill as a “huge [...], gravel-voiced, gap-toothed, radiantly magnetic, declamatory” woman⁷⁷. The “slightly crazy mother figure”⁷⁸ of Dreamland Productions was so unique, so charming, that Waters claims that even Andy Warhol himself pulled him aside at a Factory screening of *Pink Flamingos* to ask, “‘Where did you find her!’” He had spent the evening mingling with this charismatic eccentric,



Figure I: Massey on-stage at an *Edie and the Eggs* show⁷⁹.

unknowing all the while that Massey had no idea who he was⁸⁰. There is nary a hateful word to be said in memory of Massey, who was known for housing stray cats and homeless community members⁸¹. Like many other Dreamlanders, Massey tragically died young in 1984 from diabetes and cancer complications following a career as an underground movie star and punk rock frontwoman for her band *Edie and the Eggs*.

Even Waters himself describes Massey as “too nice,” without “a mean bone in her body...the most unvicious person I’ve ever met in my life”⁸². Paradoxically, he claims that she

⁷⁶ Per an un 1978 interview with Waters.

⁷⁷ Sedgwick and Moon, 242.

⁷⁸ Waters, *Shock Value*, 180.

⁷⁹ Roberts, Ebet. “Untitled.” last.fm, n.d.

⁸⁰ Waters, *Shock Value*, 182.

⁸¹ Hope C. Tarr, and Kendell Shaffer. “Edith Massey: The Egg Lady in Her Own Words.” *Baltimore Magazine*, Rosebud Entertainment, 27 May 2021.

⁸² “Edith Massey The Egg Lady.” Appearances by Edith Massey and John Waters, *Youtube*, 1978 (05:25-35).

“never threatens the audience no matter how bizarre her role⁸³”. The question remains: if she is remembered as the kindest, least threatening regular in Waters’ sordid cast list, how do her characters evoke monstrosity within the context of Waters’ films? Furthermore, as an ostensibly cisgender and heterosexual woman who claims at different points to have left her husband of five years out of “restlessness” for other men⁸⁴, what type of monstrosity does Massey portray in-context? Although Massey is best remembered for her role as Mama Edie, better known as the “Egg Lady”, in *Pink Flamingos*, perhaps her most important contributions to Watersesque queer monstrosity are in her roles as “fag-hag”⁸⁵ Aunt Ida in *Female Trouble* as well as the tyrannical Queen Carlotta of Mortville in *Desperate Living*. Both of these women, as cisgender and heterosexual as Massey herself, make clear the ways in which the non/normativity of queer culture is mediated through cisheteropatriarchal standards of respectability and desirability, precisely because her characters beget specific modes of queer monstrosity from the other monsters on-screen with her. Just as Aunt Ida does everything in her power to dissuade her cishet nephew Gater from the “sick and boring life [of a heterosexual],”⁸⁶ Queen Carlotta’s task is to keep the deviant subjects of her kingdom “mortified at their daily existence⁸⁷”, specifically for her own empowerment and amusement. Her characters suggest the consequences that may arise were a cishet woman to be so touched by queer culture as to become an acid-throwing or twink-screwing meta-queer monster. As such, Massey’s monsters parallel the real-world hegemonic cishet cultural mediation against which audiences, queer or not, can subjectively evaluate the monstrosity of queerness in the context of each film’s universe.

⁸³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 180.

⁸⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 188.

⁸⁵ Waters’ own description (Waters, *Shock Value* 95).

⁸⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 182.

⁸⁷ Waters, *Shock Value*, 167.

To begin, *Desperate Living* centers the journey of Peggy Gravel, a deranged housewife fresh out of the mental hospital whose nurse Grizelda assists her in the haphazard murder of her conventional, domestic husband by sitting on him, crushing him to suffocation. Both now implicated in yet another absurd Watersesque crime, they are directed by a perverted policeman to hide out in Mortville, a “special town for people like [them] two; people who should be so embarrassed by what they done”⁸⁸. Mortville, however, is a decrepit “village of idiots”⁸⁹ full of the oddball rejects of society; they are subjected to the oppressive reign of Queen Carlotta and her army of queer leather-daddy soldiers. Peggy and Grizelda are begrudgingly sheltered by Muffy St. Jacques, exiled for suffocating a tripping babysitter in a bowl of dog food, and her lover Mole McHenry, an ex-wrestler murderer who floats in the liminal space between butch lesbian and trans man. Realizing the advantages offered to her through allegiance to Queen Carlotta, Peggy sells out to rule beside her, while Grizelda is killed for defending Queen Carlotta’s abandoned daughter Coo-Coo from the Queen’s effeminate cronies. However, the constituents of Mortville rise up to dissent against the Queen’s tyranny, and the film ends with shots of the insurgents feasting on the roasted body of the Queen with a piglike apple in her mouth⁹⁰.

The monsters in this film are surely difficult to identify; how can one claim to identify any sort of normative social constant in a shantytown inhabited purely by society’s oddball rejects? If anything, it would seem that deviating from the norm *is* the norm: Queen Carlotta even orders that Peggy and Grizelda are taken to her “ugly experts” for a “complete overhaul” upon their introduction to Mortville, transforming them from a trained professional working for

⁸⁸ Waters, *Desperate Living* (14:38-44); John Waters, “Desperate Living”. *Trash Trio: Three Screenplays*, Vintage Books, 1988, pp. 107.

⁸⁹ Waters, *Trash Trio*, 112.

⁹⁰ Waters, *Desperate Living* (01:28:50).

an upper-class housewife into two gaudy women with bad dye jobs, garish makeup, low-cut tops, and skimpy bottoms⁹¹. However, some notable context for this film is Waters' stated intention to challenge himself and his audiences by making "an X-rated movie without any sex or violence," resulting in what he describes as a "lesbian melodrama about revolution"⁹². As such, it becomes clear that Waters relies on his queer audiences' subjectivity and experience of real-world normativity to glean the monstrous queer-liberatory — even revolutionary, per his words — possibility within *Desperate Living*.

Again, liberation in the case of this film pertains to structures of hegemonic power held by the privileged cishet, which oppress those who monstrously dare to deviate from the norm—in this case the convicted queers who populate and eventually rule Mortville. Queen Carlotta is not only the head of Mortville's government, she is one who propagates a perception of herself as a capital-G God entitled to the honor of her subjects⁹³. In addition, she presides over her family as a despotic mother with unadulterated power to dictate her daughter's fate. She is a site where the hegemonic cishet structures of faith, family, and governance converge; it only follows that she stakes the rules of existence in her jurisdiction as such:

"You must live here in constant mortification, solely existing to bring me and my tourists a few moments of royal amusement. I am not responsible for your income, living conditions, or personal happiness. Have I made myself perfectly clear?" (Waters, *Desperate Living*, 31:18-37; *Trash Trio* 123).

If anything, Queen Carlotta herself is not only *Desperate Living*'s antagonist, but also contextually the monster of Mortville. She deviates from the norm because unlike her subjects,

⁹¹ Waters, *Trash Trio*, 125.

⁹² Waters, *Shock Value*, 158.

⁹³ Waters, *Trash Trio*, 123.

there is nothing for her to be ashamed of in the eyes of real-world hegemonic structures: not only is she cishet, but she has evaded criminal status under the law.

What's more, this contextually non-normative difference does indeed pose a threat to the constituents of Mortville because it justifies her exercise of authoritarian power over the people. They must not only hyperbolize their monstrous nonconformity, but do so specifically in a way which is explicitly mediated through the monarchy of Mortville, constructed as per Queen Carlotta's perversely cishet sensibilities. Consider, for example, the sexual gratification which Queen Carlotta garners by demanding sex from her campily effeminate gaggle of subjugated gay soldiers⁹⁴. Her minions are clearly demarcated as dominants within gay leather culture according to their dress: they sport telltale military caps and lack any type of collar or restraint. As they capture and present Peggy and Grizelda to Queen Carlotta, they force the pair to their knees while humiliating them with the sexually degrading language defining dom(me)s in the BDSM scene: "Don't be crying, crybaby! Daddy's not gonna leave you now"⁹⁵. However, their dominance is foiled by Queen Carlotta, who whips them into shape with the unison refrain, "*We honor you, Queen Carlotta!*"



Figure J: One of Queen Carlotta's twinkies forcing Peggy Gravel (as portrayed by Mink Stole) to eat cockroaches⁹⁶.

⁹⁴ Waters, *Desperate Living* (34:49-36:05).

⁹⁵ Waters, *Desperate Living* (28:28-36).

⁹⁶ Waters, *Desperate Living* (29:29).

Like a dominatrix in a queen's garb, only she is able to wrangle these leather-daddies from whom she even solicits sex. It is certainly odd to see Ed Peranio as a twink soldier ordered to jackhammer Queen Carlotta, all the more monstrous when we consider that he is ordered to perform a specifically queer mode of sexual engagement by topping her in his leather gear. As such, Queen Carlotta could be understood as a meta-queer monster curating her perception of queerness as a cishet woman; even Waters himself was "shocked" with the bold command with which Massey ad-libbed her demands: "Whip it out and show it hard! Come on, daddy, fuck me!"⁹⁷ Massey, as Queen Carlotta, thus performs a monstrous *queering* of queer sex as an outsider: is it still gay sex if it is a gay man on top of a straight woman? Moreover, is it still queer sex if the feminine cishet woman is dommeing the leather twink? Queen Carlotta's monstrosity arises in consideration that the queerness she curates is overtly for her "royal amusement": she wants her deviant subjects to perform their deviance specifically for her own benefit as their ruler.

Moreover, it becomes clear that this hegemonic oppression is specific to queers because this is a town populated by them: there are no cishet characters in *Desperate Living* who meet happy endings— in fact all of their fates end in death. Peggy's husband is squashed to death under the weight of her female future lover; likewise, Coo-Coo's hetero fiancé is shot by the Queen's soldiers, while the Queen herself is killed and eaten by her liberated subjects, headed by a band of livid lesbian dissidents. In this sense, *Desperate Living* could come to be understood as an inversion of what has come to be identified as the "bury your gays" trope, which identifies a tendency throughout literary media to kill off a given narrative's queer characters and thus systemically deny them the possibility of a happy ending. If anything, this film is a "bury your

⁹⁷ Waters, *Shock Value*, 183.

straights” narrative, if you will. The fact that the chief “straight” holding so many power structures in Mortville is defeated by the very queers she keeps under her thumb represents the monstrous possibility of queers rising up in dissidence against the cisheteropatriarchal power systems which oppress them. If Mortville is where society’s most unseemly go to live in constant mortification for their deviance, its people’s revolution demonstrates that a society’s queer monsters are fully capable of dismantling the systems mortifying them in the first place.

In *Female Trouble*, Massey portrays the leather-clad, bleached-blond Aunt Ida, the monstrous aunt of Dawn Davenport’s (as portrayed by Divine) love interest and later ex-husband, Gater Nelson. Aunt Ida is, by Waters’ own description, another “fag-hag”⁹⁸, defined within gay culture as a heterosexual woman who prefers the company of queer men. Her greatest disappointment is the heterosexuality of her beloved nephew, a beautician, whom she tries to convince time and time again to try and date men. Perhaps some of Massey’s most iconic dialogue is delivered thus:

“Oh honey, I’d be so happy if you’d turn nellie [...] but you could change! Queers are just better. I’d be so proud if you was a fag and had a nice beautician boyfriend. I’d never have to worry [...] I worry you’ll work in an office, have children, celebrate wedding anniversaries. The world of a heterosexual is a sick and boring life!” (Waters, *Female Trouble* 21:26-22:00)

To no avail, Gater courts and later marries his star client at the beauty salon, Dawn Davenport.

⁹⁸ Waters, *Shock Value*, 95, 182.

Aunt Ida is seen sobbing at their wedding, albeit with a look of anguish unlike the other guests' tearful smiles⁹⁹. After Dawn ends her marriage to Gater in a contentious divorce, costing him his job at the salon, Gater bitterly



Figure K: Massey as Aunt Ida in *Female Trouble*¹⁰⁰.

relocates to Detroit for an auto-industry job. Upon his exit, Aunt Ida runs caterwauling to Dawn's house, where the owners of the beauty salon — Donald and Donna Dasher as played by David Lochary and Mary Vivian Pearce, respectively — are taking glamor shots of Dawn simulating various types of crime, namely child abuse against her daughter, Taffy. Ultimately, Aunt Ida barges into their photoshoot to throw a jar of acid on Dawn's face in revenge for pushing her precious Gater away from her and into a "sick and boring" heterosexual life¹⁰¹.

Although Massey does not portray a protagonist in *Female Trouble* nor *Desperate Living*, her characters' attitudes towards queerness and the actions which arise in consequence set in motion the developments of queer monstrosity centered in each narrative. As opposed to the other films within Waters' *Trash Trio*, the in-universe sexual and gendered norm would appear to be based in cisheterosexuality. The characters in *Female Trouble* in-and-of-themselves do not present or engage in queer gender or sexuality until the film's conclusion after Dawn, driven to monstrous madness by her obsession with criminal beauty, takes a lesbian lover before meeting her monstrous fate on death row¹⁰². It is therefore understandable that in this narrative,

⁹⁹ Waters, *Female Trouble* (26:58).

¹⁰⁰ Waters, *Female Trouble* (20:45).

¹⁰¹ Waters, *Female Trouble* (42:30-49:40).

¹⁰² Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:29:29-31:59).

queerness is the very culmination of a criminally monstrous life spent, in Foucault's words, committing "breach[es] of the law that automatically [stand] outside the law"¹⁰³.

Notwithstanding, much like in *Desperate Living*, it is the meta-queer monstrosity of another cishet woman obsessed with queer culture — a "fag-hag" — which propels the narrative of *Female Trouble* as she seeks to corrupt an institutional, heterosexual marriage in favor of a non-normative queer life. Gater, seeking to quiet his aunt's demands about his heterosexual lifestyle, rushes into a contentious marriage with Dawn, a client from his work. Aunt Ida's entitlement to her nephew's life and lifestyle culminates in the film's midpoint, after which Dawn is fully transformed into a "monstrous character" per Waters' own words¹⁰⁴. The acid attack is what impulses Dawn to "plunge headlong" into the monstrous idea that "crime is beauty"¹⁰⁵, after which she does anything and everything in her power to gain notoriety as the epitome of criminal beauty, completing her journey from "teen-age delinquent to mugger, prostitute, unwed mother, child abuser, fashion model, nightclub entertainer, murderess, and jailbird"¹⁰⁶.

It is thus that Aunt Ida is posited precisely as an aunt, a surrogate mother figure for Gater in lieu of any direct parentage. She is presented among teachable moralizations of her nephew's life, attempting to bestow upon him the attitude that, "If they're smart they're queer, and if they're stupid they're straight!"¹⁰⁷ Consequently, she serves as Gater's "first contact with 'authority'", through which he is taught "through interaction with the mother [figure], about [his] body: the shape of the body, the clean and unclean, the proper and improper..."¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰³ See Weinstock's reference to Foucault, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 102.

¹⁰⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 100.

¹⁰⁷ Waters, *Female Trouble*, 41:57-42:08.

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 218.

However, her refusal to release the ideological stronghold she holds over Gater leads to her ultimate rejection, or more precisely, “abject[ion] at that moment when the child rejects her for the [figure] who represents the symbolic order¹⁰⁹”, in this case the glamorous yet heterosexual intersection of crime and beauty posed by Dawn Davenport and the Dashers. In this sense, Aunt Ida is constructed as a figure of the “monstrous-feminine” as defined by Barbara Creed, a maternal figure opposite an “invariably absent” father who “does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules,’— that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’”¹¹⁰. Already, Aunt Ida is a “queer” mother in the sense that she is a mother-by-proxy in lieu of Gater’s actual parents— they are so absent from this film that there is no mention of them, but what is the need if Aunt Ida herself is the one who attempts and fails to create her nephew’s worldview within her own home? At the same time, she “retains a close hold over the child [because] it can serve to authenticate her existence — an existence which needs validation because of her problematic relation to the symbolic realm¹¹¹”. Although Creed refers here to the classical Freudian symbolism of the phallic father and the “lacking” mother, in the case of Aunt Ida, her nephew’s heterosexuality threatens her situation within queer cultural symbolism as she becomes a hag with no fags, abjected as a queer monster for her inability to “[take] up her proper place in the relation to the Symbolic¹¹²”.

However, it is Gater’s abjection of his queerly monstrous-feminine mother figure which “forms a vast backdrop for the enactment of all the events”¹¹³, culminating in the ultimate monstrification of her niece-in-law as she becomes increasingly more criminal, more beautiful, more monstrous. Aunt Ida consequently furthers her monstrosity by engaging in her own

¹⁰⁹ Creed, 212.

¹¹⁰ Creed, 212, 217.

¹¹¹ Creed, 217.

¹¹² Creed, 217.

¹¹³ Creed, 224.

criminality: she disfigures her nephew's wife by attacking her with acid. As such, she "exceeds the capacity of law" by "violat[ing] both the laws of society and the laws of nature"¹¹⁴, leading to her eventual imprisonment and punishment at the hands of Dawn, who encloses her in a birdcage and cuts off Aunt Ida's hand at the suggestion of the corrupting Dasher couple. Aunt Ida subsequently convinces another child of a monstrous-feminine mother to rescue her: this is Dawn's own daughter Taffy, as portrayed by Dreamland regular Mink Stole. Upset by her mother's increasingly neglectful and criminal lifestyle, she squanders Dawn's glamorous revenge against Aunt Ida, once again triggering a chain of events which serve to foment her mother's monstrosity. Taffy's escape from her mother's household culminates in Dawn's disavowal and murder of her own daughter, rendering her "ready" before her crowd of beautiful-criminal allies now that her daughter is "*finally*"¹¹⁵ dead!"¹¹⁶



Figure L: a frame from *Female Trouble* in which a bound and caged Aunt Ida is flanked by Dawn, a vengeful Taffy (as depicted by Mink Stole), and the corrupting Dashers (as portrayed by David Lochary and Mary Vivian Pearce)¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁴ Foucault's words via Weinstock, 26.

¹¹⁵ My own emphasis.

¹¹⁶ Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:14:15-22).

¹¹⁷ Waters, *Female Trouble* (58:38).

Aunt Ida figures as the backdrop character who perpetuates *Female Trouble*'s monstrous protagonist into what Julia Kristeva defines aptly as “the world of the mother (a universe without shame)¹¹⁸”, anything but the “sick and boring life” she warned her beloved nephew against. To a socially-conventional point of view, this monstrous universe without shame leads Dawn down a dark path in which she abuses her family, murders her fans, and meets a desolate fate at the electric chair, cut down from any opportunity for redemption. However, this is a queer film with queer morals, in the literal sense of the word indicating that the logic of the universe is “made strange”, in dissonance with the conventional hegemonic morality of the real world. Foucault reminds us that “understandings of normalcy and deviancy are context dependent and mutable¹¹⁹”, and in the context of *Female Trouble*, monstrosity is not only paradoxically normal but desirable as evidenced by the film's ethos that crime is beauty. As such, Aunt Ida helps Dawn to reach her apotheosis until she is “so fucking beautiful [she] can't stand it [her]self!”¹²⁰. She relishes in her monstrosity, enthralled by the point at which she receives “the death penalty...the equivalent to the Academy Award in her chosen profession of crime¹²¹”. Her monstrous opposition to the norms of a “sick and boring life” defined by the constraints of hegemonic normalcy is precisely her success; her pinnacle is her execution, retribution for her crimes in the eyes of the law but a marker of her accomplishment in the context of her own deviant morality.

Audiences, therefore, are left to understand that they are the ones in charge of defining their own contextual markers of success, of beauty; never mind a regulatory opposition so strong it ultimately exterminates the protagonist who demonstrates such an ethos. Punishment is

¹¹⁸ Kristeva's words via Creed, 218.

¹¹⁹ See Weinstock's reference to Foucault, 26.

¹²⁰ Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:18:01-06).

¹²¹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 95.

traditionally understood as aversive; it is a repressive and often violent act which seeks to control behaviors deemed undesirable by the punishing party¹²². However, Dawn's monstrous fate reminds us, in the eloquent words of former prodomme Miss Christina Abernathy, that "you rule your own desires and one of the options you have is to turn control of those desires over"¹²³. As she is prepared for execution, Dawn does exactly this, turning control of her desires to the "hogs" strapping her into the electric chair where she will meet her fate¹²⁴. She never would have achieved the death penalty without Aunt Ida among her other naysayers; they act as the oppositional mediators which made her into a monster precisely because "monstrosity is always defined against that which is not monstrous"¹²⁵. As such, her final act is to thank her among "the wonderful people that made this great moment in [her] life come true"¹²⁶.



Figure M: Divine and Massey at the premiere of *Female Trouble*¹²⁷.

Aunt Ida herself ends abjected from the title of "queer monster" as she loses all
prosecutive fags to validate her hagness, although her desperate attempts to reclaim her role in

¹²² Paraphrasing here the work of Staci Newmahr, "Power Struggles: Pain and Authenticity in SM Play", *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2010.

¹²³ Abernathy, Christina. *Erotic Slavehood*. Greenery Press, 2007.

¹²⁴ Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:34:54).

¹²⁵ Weinstock, 26.

¹²⁶ Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:35:14-22).

¹²⁷ Fred W. McDarrah, "Untitled". *Vintage Everyday*, Feb. 1975.

queer culture perpetuate the monstrification of her tragically heterosexual nephew's wife. The task at hand, therefore, becomes an examination of Dawn Davenport herself, contextually the cishet woman who thwarts Aunt Ida's place in the symbolic order of queer culture. To a real-world audience, however, she appears as Divine played her character: as a real-world queer person, a "monster drag queen"¹²⁸ thrashing around wildly on-screen.

¹²⁸ Waters, *Shock Value*, 74.

IV. Divine: An Abjected Divinity

“Kill everyone now, condone first-degree murder, advocate cannibalism, eat shit! Filth are my politics, filth is my life!” (Waters, *Pink Flamingos* 01:23:05-13).

Such are the words spoken in perhaps the most iconic dialogue from Waters’ breakout hit, *Pink Flamingos*, in which Glenn Milstead as his drag persona, Divine, portrays “the queen of sleaze”, the matriarch of a family vying for the title of “the filthiest people alive”¹²⁹. Remembered as “a beautiful three-hundred-pound man who usually plays women’s parts in [Waters’] celluloid atrocities¹³⁰”, Divine is memorialized in queer history as loud, controversial, larger-than-life, incredibly kind, shocking, and influential for generations of queer artists and performers for years to come¹³¹. Like Massey, she died young from a heart attack at the age of 42, three weeks after the release of the original *Hairspray* and only one day before she was scheduled to shoot an appearance on the network sitcom *Married...with Children*. Many of those close to Divine agree that she was tragically struck down just before her break into the mainstream¹³².

It is important to note, however, that Divine was ultimately a character performed by Milstead: Waters remembers him describing his drag as his “work clothes” and claims that “if Divine really was like the characters he portrays, he would have been locked away in a mental institution years ago”¹³³. Divine was allegedly conceived by Milstead himself alongside Waters with the intention “to scare hippies”; Waters even claims that “he didn’t want to pass as a

¹²⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 2.

¹³⁰ Waters, *Shock Value*, 5.

¹³¹ See Simon Doonan’s introduction to *Shock Value, RuPaul’s Drag Race* S07:E09 (“Divine Inspiration”, 2015), or this thesis.

¹³² Jeffrey Schwarz, *I Am Divine*. Tubi, Automat Pictures, 2013 (01:33:22-34:57).

¹³³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 145-146.

woman; he wanted to pass as a monster¹³⁴”. She was often presented with the tagline of “*the most beautiful woman in the world*”¹³⁵, a slogan which incited controversy considering that she was an overweight crossdresser with garish eyebrows painted all the way up to her receding hairline.



Figure N: Divine in 1978 at Grace Jones' birthday party¹³⁶.

The elements comprising Divine's monstrosity can be understood as a monstrous oppositionality composed of signifiers denoting both fatness and queerness via gender and sexual non-normativity¹³⁷. Queer theorists Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon dissect the intersections of fatphobia and homo/transphobia in their 1990 performance piece *Divinity: A*

¹³⁴ Waters via interview with Alex E. Jung. "John Waters on Anna Wintour, Staying Youthful, and Why Trump Ruined Camp." *Vulture*, 28 June 2019. This claim can definitely be contested by contemporary understandings of trans identity as well as Waters' own words about his muse: "I think of him as 'he' when he's out of costume and as 'she' when he's in drag. Divine prefers 'shim', but this is grammatically awkward." (Waters, *Shock Value* 5) Divine also claims to have at some point "thought about having hormone injections so [she] could have big breasts" (Divine's words via an interview with Waters, *Shock Value*, 154)

¹³⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 146, 150.

¹³⁶ Ron Galella, "Untitled". Vintage Everyday, June 1978.

¹³⁷ Moon and Sedgwick, 218, 220.

Dossier, staking the argument that they are related via their functions under a presumed “economy of knowingness”; e.g. cisheteropatriarchally privileged individuals — denoted by their adherence to hegemonically normative standards of cishet attraction and attractiveness — oppress such queer bodies by operating on the presumption that they know something that the fat, gay, and/or trans person does not¹³⁸. This “economy of knowingness”, therefore, opens the monstrous possibility of erasing these types of people from society¹³⁹. What Divine does that is so revolutionarily monstrous is completely avow herself as a fat and queer person, taking what Sedgwick identifies so eloquently as a “materially dangerous” risk of

“uttering [...] as a brave declaration that truth which can scarcely in this instance ever have been less than self-evident...and far more importantly [...] staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of *the representational contract* between one’s body and one’s world” (Moon and Sedgwick 230).

To take that which hegemonically defines one as abject and not only refuse to hide it (which would thus engage in a Kristevian self-abjection¹⁴⁰) but instead actively relish in it as the epitome of desirability is precisely the challenge which Divine poses to a hegemony which seeks to oppress or even eradicate the existence of queer and/or fat people. She is not ashamed of any part of herself, because why would she?— she is the most beautiful woman in the world. In fact, one could even claim that she embodies her own version of the “divine feminine”¹⁴¹ in the unrelenting way she worships herself and her own body. For instance, *Female Trouble*’s climax occurs when Dawn Davenport asserts herself not only as “crime personified” — physically

¹³⁸ Moon and Sedgwick, 221-222, 229-230.

¹³⁹ Moon and Sedgwick, 226-227.

¹⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva’s words via Judith Butler, “Chapter 3: Subversive Bodily Acts, IV: Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions.” *Gender Trouble*, 2nd ed., Routledge, New York, NY, 1999, pp. 169-170.

¹⁴¹ Adapting here the idea of the “divine feminine” popularized on the Internet in the early 2020s, comprising elements of feminine mysticism throughout history through Goddess-worship, while also claiming a sacred connection to qualities of nature, intuition, nurture, and the like (Nina Kahn, “Everything You Need To Know About The 'Divine Feminine'.” *Bustle*, Bustle Digital Group, 25 Oct. 2017).

signified by her transformation into an acid-scarred diva with a partially shaved head, her rolls of fat squeezed into a tight, bedazzled white leotard, all signals of her queer-coded criminal transgression — but also as “so fucking beautiful [she] can’t stand it [herself]!”¹⁴² Her power is a perversion of the feminine divinity parroted by second-wave feminists onward; she is not driven by her innate nurture or communion with the universe. Rather, she is a new, radical, *neo*-Divine feminine, empowered by her criminality, which is to say the multiplicitous way she embodies categorical transgressions across bodily, gender, and sexuality significations.



Figure O: the final frame of *Female Trouble*, in which an unrecognizable Divine is executed by the state¹⁴³.

What propelled Divine to fame alongside Waters is arguably the opposition they faced from censor boards, as Waters lauds the 21-year head of the Maryland State Board of Censors, Mary Avara, as “the best press agent [he] could have”¹⁴⁴. Critical reception of Waters’ early films have all but disappeared from the digitized archives of today’s Internet, but the legacy of the

¹⁴² Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:17:35-18:07).

¹⁴³ Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:36:32).

¹⁴⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 89.

opposition Waters faced from a film culture mired in the “fear of films giving people ideas”¹⁴⁵ stands as the real-world mediator structurally defining the queer monstrosity within his canon. Considering the amount of opposition *Pink Flamingos* faced upon its release, this first part of the *Trash Trio* may stand as the most stark example of the intentions behind John Waters’ monsters, aptly reflected by the Australian Classification Board as a “challenge [against] society’s conventions on good taste and appropriate behaviour”¹⁴⁶. The ACB cited the incestuous fellatio scene between Divine and her son Crackers as the main offender in this film, barring it from Australian distribution with an RC (“Refused Classification”) rating. Their critique of this scene detailed it as “conceptually abhorrent and sufficiently detailed and exploitative”, sealing its fate with the comment that the “mother-son relationship is so patently ridiculous that [Waters’] aspect cannot be taken seriously”¹⁴⁷.

However, this is precisely the point of the monstrosity in *Pink Flamingos*. Warhol superstar Paul Morrissey posits that “the entire film is based on the premise that these people are sexual degenerates, and therefore they’re absurd and they’re idiotic and they’re totally ridiculous”¹⁴⁸. The opposition of censor boards to *Pink Flamingos* represents the danger of taking Waters’ queer monsters at their word, centered around the possibility that they may push the boundary of what is considered moral, acceptable, and respectable behavior¹⁴⁹. Per the ACB, one such possibility Divine represents is her own perversion of the “monstrous feminine” figure in the way she portrays the incestuous mother in *Pink Flamingos*. Creed invokes Kristeva in arguing that

¹⁴⁵ In the words of Nolan Schmidt, “FILM CORNER - Sick Sickies: A Look at the Notorious Film Censorship Board of Maryland.” *Texas Free Press*, 23 July 2020.

¹⁴⁶ See “Censorship of Pink Flamingos (1972).” *Refused Classification: Censorship in Australia*, 10 Feb. 2023.

¹⁴⁷ “Censorship of Pink Flamingos (1972).”

¹⁴⁸ Yeager, *Divine Trash* (1:09:22-51).

¹⁴⁹ Bernstein, Adam. “Mary Avara, Staunch Md. Film Censor, Dies.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 11 Aug. 2000.

“definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection—particularly in relation to the following religious “abominations”: sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body; and incest.” (Creed 213)

Pink Flamingos, therefore, is an apt depiction of Divine’s monstrosity. As her self-titled character, she exemplifies every single element of monstrosity posited by Creed:

- *Corporeal alteration/the feminine body*: in-universe, there is no question as to whether Divine is a woman or not—no one dares to suggest she is anything other than a woman. However, on-screen, audiences see this woman portrayed by a drag queen, coding her as a part of the transgender umbrella per Leslie Feinberg’s radically inclusive definition:

“All gender-variant people who do not conform to social norms for typical men and women [...] transvestites and transsexuals (who may be either female-to-male or male-to-female), androgynes, butch lesbians, effeminate gay men, drag queens, people who would prefer to answer to new pronouns or to none at all, non-stereotypical heterosexual men and women, intersex individuals, and members of non-Western European indigenous cultures who claim such identities” (Feinberg via Stryker, *Transgender* 1).

- *Decay and death/human sacrifice/murder/the corpse*: lest we forget, Divine’s central ethos is revealed at the end of *Pink Flamingos* in part as “[killing] everyone now, [condoning] first-degree murder, [and advocating] cannibalism.” Of course, she is one to practice what she preaches: when her birthday party is thwarted by police officers, frenzied by the debauchorous display of criminality therein, she leads her guests in murdering and cannibalizing these protectors of hegemonic social order.

- *Bodily wastes*: the crowning glory of *Pink Flamingos*, its most infamous, iconic moment, the clincher at the end of her statement of politics (“Eat shit!”): Divine eats fresh dog feces, unsimulated, as the final scene in the film. In fact, its final shot is a gagging Divine, grinning impishly through a mouthful of shit¹⁵⁰.
- *Sexual immorality and perversion/incest*: Divine delights in entertaining her birthday party with a performance by a man flexing his prolapsed anus in tune to music; at this same party, she huffs poppers, a signifier of preparation for oral/anal sex in gay culture¹⁵¹. Perhaps most starkly, she later fellates her own son (“Crackers”) while they invade their nemeses, the Marbles’, home¹⁵².

The incest sequence may be the most monstrous part of Divine’s femininity as it depicts the influence of her monstrosity upon her own son. Kristeva might describe this instance as a



Figure P: Divine removes her son Crackers’ pants in preparation for the offending incest scene¹⁵³.

failed abjection of the mother in which ““the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)’¹⁵⁴” is not only violated, but gleefully overthrown, as though the

very prohibition itself is abjected in place of the mother. Crackers’ father is notably absent from the film, paralleling Gater’s lack of a father figure in Aunt Ida’s household. As such, if we

¹⁵⁰ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (01:31:35-32:18).

¹⁵¹ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (54:18-58:45).

¹⁵² Waters, *Pink Flamingos*, (01:07:05-09:08).

¹⁵³ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (01:08:08).

¹⁵⁴ Kristeva’s words via Creed, 217.

invoke classical psychoanalytic film theory, he is rife for significations implying failure in his Oedipus complex and a subsequent ineptitude in the formation of his own ego and identity. Drawing on Freud's original concept, a child's first object of erotic desire is his mother, as he conflates his "sexual instincts" with his "ego-instincts" necessary for survival as an infant who lacks autonomy¹⁵⁵. Ultimately, the child succeeds in solidifying his own individual identity by disavowing the mother's differentiating phallic lack via the mirror-stage of ego formation¹⁵⁶. If the mirror-stage allows for the development of desires distinct from those of the mother, it becomes apparent that Crackers never grew out of the phase where his "ego-instincts" became differentiated from those of his "sexual instincts". Consequently, this failure to master the Oedipal stage is specifically what allows him and his mother to monstrously bypass the prohibition of incest¹⁵⁷.

Incest aside, another feature of the ACB's opposition to *Pink Flamingos* are the "overtones of voyeurism" they see present throughout the film¹⁵⁸. Granted, voyeurism certainly does feature in another monstrous sex scene in the film, in which Crackers crushes a real chicken to death between him and the double-agent Cookie, as the couple have sex while Divine's traveling companion Cotton looks on from a window¹⁵⁹. However, voyeurism may take more precedence at the conclusion of *Female Trouble*, when Waters has another one of his monsters acknowledge his real-world voyeurs: his audiences. At this moment, Dawn Davenport has reached the ultimate conclusion of her life of crime: the "Academy Award¹⁶⁰" of the electric

¹⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction". *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 1914, pp. 87.

¹⁵⁶ Christian Metz, "Identification, Mirror." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 7th ed., Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, pp. 705-707.

¹⁵⁷ See Creed, 214.

¹⁵⁸ "Censorship of *Pink Flamingos* (1972)."

¹⁵⁹ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (28:58-30:28).

¹⁶⁰ In Waters' words, *Shock Value*, 95.

chair. Like any professional receiving the highest honors for their life's work, Dawn accepts this honor with a speech. Her last words, interrupted by maniacal laughs, are thus:

“I’d like to thank all the wonderful people that made this great moment in my life come true. My daughter Taffy, who died in order to further my career. My friends Chiclette and Concetta, who should be here today. All the fans who died so fashionably and gallantly in my nightclub act. And especially all those wonderful people who were kind enough to read about me in the newspapers and watch me on the television news shows. Without all of you, my career could never have gotten this far. It is you that I murdered for and it is you that I will die for. Please remember, I love every fucking one of you!” (Waters,

Female Trouble 01:35:14-36-15)

What is notable about this scene is that Dawn breaks the fourth wall with her parting words, as Divine looks directly into the camera before frying in the chair. She is addressing the audience, her voyeurs, directly as she thanks them for their continued support. Therefore, these words written by Waters and spoken through Divine can be understood as Waters’ direct address to his own audiences. Waters is no stranger to weaving his own experiences into his films: just as Taffy plays his favorite childhood game of “car crash”¹⁶¹, and his 1998 release *Pecker*¹⁶² parodies the commodification of his work into the gallery industry, *Female Trouble* can be understood as his response to the sensationalized opposition he experienced upon the release of *Pink Flamingos*.

Psychoanalytic film theory is rife with dissections of the voyeurism inherent to the genre, but what is relevant for *Female Trouble*’s closing scene is its accusation of scopophilia, or pleasure in viewing, in Waters’ audience. Christian Metz claims that the cinematic apparatus reactivates the ego-forming pleasure of the “mirror-stage” by leading viewers to identify their perception with that of the camera, which most often depicts the perspective of the protagonist,

¹⁶¹ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (28:58-30:28); Waters, *Shock Value*, 24.

¹⁶² Polar Entertainment, 1998.

leading viewers to identify their desires precisely with those of the protagonist¹⁶³. He begs the question of viewers: “Am I not looking at myself looking at the film? This passion for seeing, the foundation of the whole edifice, am I not turning it, too, on (against) that edifice? Am I not still the voyeur I was in front of the screen, now that it is this voyeur who is being seen, thus postulating a second voyeur, the one writing at present, myself again?...¹⁶⁴”. In a sense, Waters himself is calling out the very audiences who propelled him to fame— are they not themselves watching the monstrosity on screen, increasing his viewership, spreading his notoriety?

This is precisely where the subjective monstrosity of Waters’ queer monsters can be revealed through the audience’s reception to them. The central ethos of *Female Trouble* is the idea that “crime is beauty”¹⁶⁵. As such, it hosts a cast of “monstrous characters”¹⁶⁶ who not only commit crimes but strive to do so in the most alluring, attention-seeking way possible. Dawn’s monstrosity is cultivated over the course of this narrative by the acclaim she receives from the pro-crime crowd around her; characters like her cat-burglar friends Chiclette and Concetta or Donald and Donna Dasher, the crime-photographer owners of the invite-only hair salon Dawn frequents, propel her from a shameful reticence against indulging her criminal tendencies to a point where she unflinchingly kills family and audience members for the sake of her “art”¹⁶⁷. *Female Trouble*’s monsters relish in Weinstock’s idea that “monstrosity inheres in the perception that one’s opponents choose to act immorally”¹⁶⁸ as they bolster Dawn into criminal infamy with rewards such as glamorous photoshoots depicting her red-handed in her crimes¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶³ Metz, 698-701.

¹⁶⁴ Metz, 699.

¹⁶⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 94-95.

¹⁶⁶ In Waters’ words, Waters, *Shock Value*, 102.

¹⁶⁷ Waters, *Female Trouble* (48:39-52, 01:18:14-35).

¹⁶⁸ Weinstock, 23.

¹⁶⁹ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (48:15-50:03).

There exists, within and outside of *Female Trouble*, an equivalency between queerness and criminality. Dawn is a cisheterosexual woman queered via her portrayal by a drag queen, calling to mind the 26 anti-drag bills introduced into US Congress during the 2023 legislative session¹⁷⁰. Preciado acknowledges how historically, “the majority of those who refused to live according to the patriarchal norms of sexual difference were persecuted by the police and the judicial system as potentially criminal”¹⁷¹. Weinstock invokes Foucault in claiming that according to his *The History of Sexuality*, “the human monster...violates both the laws of society and the laws of nature”¹⁷². As such, Dawn’s insistence on lauding criminality stands as queer in the sense that she transgresses the law so unrelentingly that it leads to her fate in the electric chair. But considering that she is depicted by a drag queen, her queerness forms a fundamental part of her criminal transgression, as she represents the rupture of



Figure Q: A frame from *Divine Trash* introducing Avara herself¹⁷³.

the cisheterosexual categories of male and female. Concerning his battles with the Maryland State Board of Censors, Waters writes that on one occasion, a censor blocked him from including a “vagina shot” of Divine in his final cut of *Female Trouble* during the scene where Dawn receives cunnilingus from her baby-daddy, Earl Peterson, who is also played by Divine¹⁷⁴. When

¹⁷⁰ Kimberly Kindy, “GOP Targets Drag Shows with New Bills in at Least 14 States.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 14 Feb. 2023.

¹⁷¹ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 75.

¹⁷² Weinstock, 26.

¹⁷³ Yeager, *Divine Trash* (13:18).

¹⁷⁴ Waters, *Pink Flamingos* (12:13-29).

Waters retorted, ““That’s not a vagina. That’s Divine. He’s a man.””, the censor was only more staunch in claiming that ““This scene is definitely a violation.”” He claims that the censors criminalized this particular queer transgression enough that they were willing to take him to court if he did not cut it out of the film, but lack of funds forced him to remove the shot at their behest¹⁷⁵. This is only one of many explicit instances of the criminality posed by Divine as one of Waters’ queer monsters, as her transgression of male/female categorization posed a “violation” of the “laws of nature” which the censors sought to protect. In this case, queerness equates to criminality equates to Foucault’s term of the “human monster” so depicted by Divine.

But depending on the audience in question, queerness, criminality, and monstrosity can also equate to the beauty so sought by Dawn. Returning to psychoanalytic film theory, the Freudian analysis which it draws upon presents the idea that “in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals...in their later choice of love-objects they have taken as a model [...] their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object¹⁷⁶”. As voyeurs, censors and other defendants of “respectable” cisheterosexual normativity are appalled at the idea that Waters’ films invite them to identify with the subjectivity of his queer monsters. At the same time, there is a reason that they have stood the test of time “to corrupt a whole new generation”¹⁷⁷ by representing the possibilities of queer monstrosity. Recalling the introduction, consider the trailer for *Pink Flamingos*. Infamously, he refrains from including any actual footage of the film, instead depicting on-the-spot footage of audiences leaving a midnight screening of it. This audience, notably comprised of many queer people, responds by calling it “an incredible head-spin for people” (0:41), “absolutely divine, fabulous” (0:50), and “the future of city living” (01:06). One

¹⁷⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 91.

¹⁷⁶ Freud, 87.

¹⁷⁷ Waters via interview with Bell, 2022.

interviewee lauds it as a “religious movie” (01:33), while another affirms that “John Waters has got his finger on the pulse of America [...] he’s got his thumb securely up America’s ass” (01:42-01:48)¹⁷⁸. At the same time, they label it “outrageous”, “the grossest thing I’ve seen”, “just disgusting”, and the like¹⁷⁹. These descriptions do not differ drastically from those which censors offers to justify their censorship of Waters’ films, but what makes them distinct is the glee with which they are delivered— the trailer even opens with audio of the audience’s unabashed laughter behind a title card reading “*WHAT ARE THESE PEOPLE LAUGHING AT?*”¹⁸⁰. The indulgent, queer, monstrous excess depicted in the film is what elicited these reactions from these audience members because it represents liberation rather than any danger or threat to the queers in the audience. What their overwhelmingly positive response to *Pink Flamingos* indicates is that despite naysayers’ incessant attempts to prevent Waters from releasing his queer monsters into the world, queer audiences were still able to watch them thrive on-screen, identifying with these characters as self-reflected “love-objects” made *by* a monstrous queer *for* monstrous queers. Metz claims that “when I say that ‘I see’ the film, I mean thereby a unique mixture of two contrary currents; the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release”¹⁸¹. In this sense, queer audiences can “receive” Waters’ films via their pleasurable, voyeuristic identification with the queer cultural elements comprised within his monsters. At the same time, they are also empowered to “release” cisheteronormative constraints on their non-normative expression and behavior through the queer possibility they represent.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s sixth monster thesis posits that “Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire”¹⁸². Therefore, when Divine as Dawn Davenport reminds us of her undying love

¹⁷⁸ “*Pink Flamingos*.” *YouTube*, Saliva Films, 1973.

¹⁷⁹ *Pink Flamingos* trailer (01:28-42).

¹⁸⁰ *Pink Flamingos* trailer (00:00-04).

¹⁸¹ Metz, 699.

¹⁸² Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, 49.

for “those wonderful people who were kind enough to read about me in the newspapers and watch me on the television news shows”, she is daring her audiences, queer and monstrous or not, to acknowledge our participation in the propagation of Waters’ and his monstrous, objectionable films. Watching queer monsters such as Divine wreck the screen reminds us of the incredibly tenuous, constructed nature of the cisheterosexual normativity we all internalize



Figure R: a still from *Female Trouble* in which Dawn kills her audience members “for art”¹⁸³.

from the moment of our births, as a consequence of the restrictive cishet society we exist in by-and-large. But at the same time, even censors such as Mary Avara have entered the subjectivity of Waters’ queer monsters as an inherent condition of watching his films. Though she made a name for herself in “defense of what she viewed as morality and moral duty”¹⁸⁴, she was also known to retort against claims of her intolerance by responding that “[she’s] probably looked at more naked bodies than 50,000 doctors”¹⁸⁵. One has to wonder whether her stance on “morality and moral duty” may have wavered in her 21 years unrelentingly watching what she called pornography as the head of the Maryland State Board of Censors, as Cohen reminds us that “we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom”¹⁸⁶.

¹⁸³ Waters, *Female Trouble* (01:18:31).

¹⁸⁴ Bernstein, 2000.

¹⁸⁵ Kathi Santora, “Mary Avara Did Her Best to Shield Us from Porn.” *Dying to Tell Their Stories*, New Cathedral Cemetery, 30 July 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Cohen, 49.

V. Conclusion: Normalize This!

While discussing his own coming out (or lack thereof) with BigThink in 2011, Waters quipped: “People say, you know, ‘are you a bottom or a top?’— what is this, a political party? It depends! It’s amazing to me the seriousness with [which] these questions are asked about”¹⁸⁷. Queer identity discourse might as well be a camp of political parties; the seriousness with which it is treated intracommunally may well surprise those outside the conversation. In a GQ interview with Waters himself, Jason Diamond claims that “The characters in *Pink Flamingos* vying for the title of ‘the filthiest person alive’ could be participating in a TikTok trend”¹⁸⁸. While it is certainly true that the film’s characters, sporting lurid hair colors and over-the-top makeup, would not look out of place on a “For You Page”, it is absolutely questionable whether some of Waters’ queer monsters — from Channing, the rapist “closet queen” in *Pink Flamingos*, to Mole, the abusive transmasculine butch in *Desperate Living* — would find a home among the queers online today amidst their debates on what constitutes “good” queer representation.

In the third chapter of *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam reminds us that “before queer representation can offer a view of queer culture it must first repudiate the charge of inauthenticity and inappropriateness”¹⁸⁹, but this is precisely the issue within contemporary discourses of precisely *what* constitutes “good” queer representation. Certainly, there is more representation of queer people in the media today than there was in the time when Waters was depicting them in his *Trash Trio*; a GLAAD study published in 2022 calculates that a record high of 11.9% of characters on scripted broadcast television were openly queer in the 2021-2022 season¹⁹⁰. Of course, there are many positive implications to be considered when it comes to

¹⁸⁷ “John Waters: Coming Out Is So Square.” *BigThink*, Freethink Media, 14 June 2011.

¹⁸⁸ John Waters via interview with Jason Diamond, “John Waters on His First Novel, the Death of Bad Taste, and Why Covid’s Been Bad for Perverts.” *GQ*, Condé Nast, 19 May 2022.

¹⁸⁹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 95.

¹⁹⁰ Raina Deerwater, “GLAAD’s 2021-2022 Where We Are on TV Report: LGBTQ Representation Reaches New Record Highs.” *GLAAD*, 17 Feb. 2022.

increased queer representation in the media, particularly inclusion into a public sphere which previously denied us “even the most basic rights and recognitions”¹⁹¹. However, contemporary media’s increased willingness to depict queer people and lives begs the question of *who* is being depicted and why. Much like the categories of “cishet” and “queer”, media as we understand it today constitutes a discursive technology of normalization. For queer people to be included in this discourse, our various identities and behaviors must be evaluated for marketability across all potential audiences. Our representation forces us to respond to the question: who among us can relinquish our monstrosity to the point where we become accessible to the cishet spectator? Amidst the popular cry to “normalize” ourselves to the point where we become readable and relatable to cishet consumers, we risk closing off many of the infinite possibilities we contain as we acquiesce to the terms of respectable representation as defined by marketability to cishet audiences. Instead of rupturing the norms we previously rejected outright, we are increasingly represented getting married, having children, working corporate jobs, and imitating, if not passing for, cishet life and culture. Consequently, we leave behind those of us who cannot or will not assimilate; at worst, we reject them outright for being the “wrong” kind of queer.

In today’s era more than ever, queer respectability is mediated by the queer subject’s palatability in a “market [which] has limited queer politics by fostering self and community identification via consumption”¹⁹². Media representation of queers is “a powerful apparatus to reconstitute [queer people] as ‘normal’”, emphasizing that respectability politics demand “the kind of visibility that magazines can feature and corporations can endorse”¹⁹³. Let us recall here the intrinsic connection between capitalism and the normative cisheterosexual body; cisheterosexuality in itself. These structural definitions arising from a coloniocapitalist drive for

¹⁹¹ Joshi, 421.

¹⁹² Joshi, 432.

¹⁹³ Joshi, 453.

(re)production remind us that under the multiplicitous hegemony posed by cisheterosexuality, both this identity as well as queerness are “terms without empirical content beyond the technologies that produce them”¹⁹⁴. Queer critics of the gay rights movement have managed to identify that by including queers into processes of respectable normativity, cisheterosexual hegemony only seeks to assimilate us into the same processes of capitalist (re)production, to tap into our market and/or our value as a reserve labor force, and thus construe us as redeemable members of society in this way¹⁹⁵.

As such, a consequence of this normalizing discourse of queerness with respect to cisheterosexual hegemony is precisely in the moralization of the “wrong” kind of queerness, leading “respectable” queers to consider other queers — not unlike Waters’ monsters — “morally reprehensible and denounce them for ‘giving us all a bad name’”¹⁹⁶. In its unrespectability, this “wrong” queerness is marked by its inability to be normalized, assimilated, assigned a redeemable value in cisheterosexual hegemony’s market of morality. Joshi makes an apt reference to Foucault in positing that

“Modern control of sexuality takes place via the production of knowledge through discourse. This control is exercised not only through others’ knowledge of individuals, but also through individuals’ knowledge of themselves. By internalizing prevailing social norms of sexuality and monitoring their adherence to those norms, individuals are controlled both as objects of disciplines and as self-scrutinizing subjects. These insights should motivate us to consider whether respectability, as a moral discourse, exercises control and places *limits*¹⁹⁷ on sexuality” (Joshi 422).

¹⁹⁴ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 101.

¹⁹⁵ See Preciado’s discussion of *potentia gaudendi* (*Testo Junkie* 41-51).

¹⁹⁶ Joshi, 459.

¹⁹⁷ My emphasis.

Waters' ethos was "to satirize the rules of the world [he] lived in," precisely so as to ask himself and his audiences: "What are the limits?"¹⁹⁸. Today, over 45 years after the release of the last *Trash Trio* installment, he can reflect on his representational intentions within these films, which certainly had nothing to do with respectability. His very intention was to challenge these representational politics through monstrous depictions of the individuals in his life as well as the queer culture they lived. By testing the limits of such representational politics, he managed to push it back so far that his early works are now being restored and conserved by the likes of the Criterion Collection or New York City's Museum of Modern Art¹⁹⁹.



Figure S: Drag queens Violet Chachki, Miss Fame, and Pearl Liaison impersonating Divine in a John Waters-themed episode of the cable TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race*²⁰⁰.

However, in Waters' most recent memoir, *Mr. Know-It-All: The Tarnished Wisdom of a Filth Elder*, he reveals the fact that he "became respectable", which he laments as "the worst thing that can happen," as the one thing that could possibly shock the king of shock value²⁰¹. In a

¹⁹⁸ Waters' words via interview with David Marchese, "John Waters Is Ready to Defend the Worst People in the World." *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 18 Mar. 2022.

¹⁹⁹ John Waters, "Mr. Know-It-All." *Mr Know-It-All: The Tarnished Wisdom of a Filth Elder*, 1st ed., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2019, pp. 12-13.

²⁰⁰ Still from "Divine Inspiration". *RuPaul's Drag Race*, season 7, episode 9, LogoTV, 27 Apr. 2015 (27:51).

²⁰¹ Waters, *Mr. Know-It-All*, 12-13.

sense, he regrets the loss of his monstrosity because it indicates that he has become a part of the normalizing discourse he set out to critique. With respect to this, Halberstam further indicts the ways in which the normalizing politics of queer respectability become contingent on the aesthetics of cishet consumability. He posits that “the specific features which have stereotypically connoted [queer] in the past...must be blotted out to provide a free channel for commodification”²⁰², the action of which can be read as a form of queer success as opposed to queer failure. José Esteban Muñoz, in his 2009 publication *Cruising Utopia*, defines queer failure as such “because it rejects normative ideas of value,” furthermore developing it as “a spoiled subjectivity, who is considered a loser, or rubbish, who refuses to live by an outside rule, a system of categorization that celebrates the normal, and instead insists on her own value as a countercultural heroine”²⁰³. Waters himself may be one of the most glorious examples of queer failure we have today: in a 2023 interview with INDY Week, he even posits that his very “job is to praise what others despise”²⁰⁴. And of course, the spoiled subjectivities of countercultural heroines such as Massey and Divine inspired queer icons from Andy Warhol to RuPaul in propelling queer art and culture into what it is today.

A characteristic of queer failure is its ability to eschew cishet valorization by escaping into what Muñoz terms a “queer utopia”, the self-defined idealism of which “may be the only way to usher in a new mode of radicalism that can perhaps release queer politics from its current death grip”. This feature of queer escape into utopia “need not be a surrender but, instead, may be more like a refusal of a dominant order and its systemic violence”²⁰⁵. Ultimately, it also reminds us of Cohen’s second monster thesis: “the monster always escapes”²⁰⁶. Waters’ queer

²⁰² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 96.

²⁰³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, New York, 2019, pp. 173-174.

²⁰⁴ Polk, Shelbi. “Waiting for The End of the World with John Waters.” *INDY Week*, John Hurlld, 1 Feb. 2023.

²⁰⁵ Muñoz, 172.

²⁰⁶ Cohen, 38.

monsters are certainly no exception; just as Divine flees towards a new life in Idaho by the end of *Pink Flamingos*, the lesbian revolutionaries of *Desperate Living* cannibalize their despotic ruler, and even Dawn Davenport turns her capital punishment into a conceptual escape as an award for her beautiful criminality.

Notwithstanding, one cannot help but notice the tendency towards normalization in queer culture today, particularly within the context of media representation and social media. We still cannot escape a discourse which seeks to incorporate us into a “system of dissociated assimilation”²⁰⁷. Surely, there are benefits to the expansion of queer representation; arguably, part of the power of cinema is its ability to reflect us back to ourselves, to echo the multiplicity of human experience and show us as spectators that somewhere in time and space, someone’s story parallels our own and we are not alone. A simple Google search can reveal thousands of recollections celebrating the first time a queer person saw themselves reflected on-screen by a queer character who opened for them the world of possibilities in a life departing from cisheterosexuality. At the same time, Halberstam is astute in pointing out that contemporary queer representation “depends completely upon a heteronormative set of visual and erotic expectations...precisely by catering to conventional notions of visual pleasure”²⁰⁸. As such, queers are effectively made respectable, and therefore representable, by acceding to the demand to make ourselves understandable, and therefore consumable, within the logic of cisheterosexual norms. But the danger in “normalizing” queers is the loss of the *anti-conformist* nature of *queerness* in itself. Revisiting the 1990 pamphlet *Queers Read This*, the anonymous authors of this text eloquently define queerness as

²⁰⁷ Joshi, 428.

²⁰⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 95-96.

“leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-fuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night” (*Queers Read This* 2).

This is precisely why the tendency towards normalization is so concerning in contemporary queer culture. When the media that we look to for representation acquiesces to such harmful standards of respectability, we internalize that our goal as queers is to represent respectability by distancing ourselves from the queer monsters among us who not only refuse but shatter those limits. Many queers in my own generation²⁰⁹ are familiar with the sharp boundaries some members of our community draw between acceptable and unrespectable queer identities, representations, and behaviors. However, by drawing these boundaries, these normalizing discourses only accede to the admission that we must represent some sort of “redeemable” value of respectability within an economy of cisheterosexual meaning, a “commerce [which] is the production of the species as species”²¹⁰.

²⁰⁹ And certainly others.

²¹⁰ Preciado, *Testo Junkie* 51.

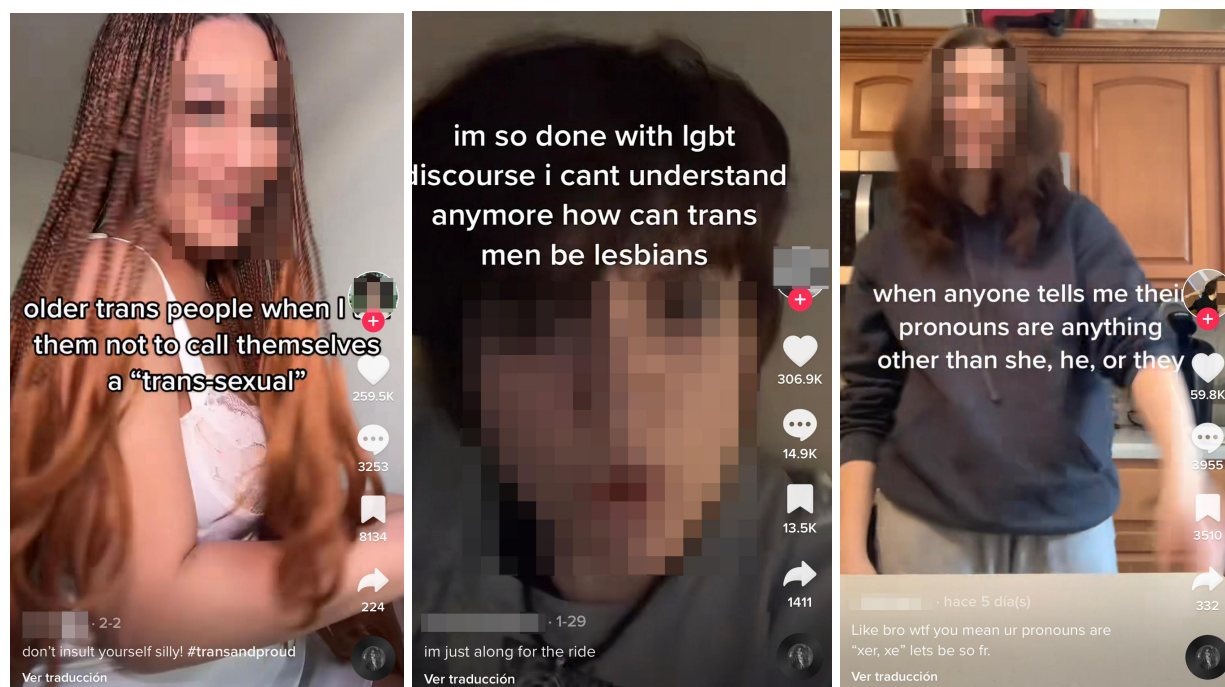


Figure T: A few screenshots from TikTok²¹¹. Faces, usernames, and profile pictures have been blurred to protect anonymity.

These debates are nothing new to our community— when I consulted with Gayle Rubin over email with questions concerning this thesis, she noted that “long ago, before social media, [she] was on assorted internet email discussion lists, and the same topics would come up about every two years, as new people joined and weren't part of the earlier conflagrations...I think there were versions of this back in the 70s”²¹². However, Internet culture and social media have exacerbated this discourse through an algorithmic “echo chamber effect”²¹³; our feeds are programmed to increase engagement by connecting us mainly with people whose opinions already align with our own. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that there are scores of young queers on social media who band together through their commitments to a normalizing discourse pushed on them through an increasingly respectable depiction and social understanding of queer

²¹¹ 2023, n.p., n.d.

²¹² From my personal correspondence with Gayle Rubin, "Re: Follow-Up from Rappaport Lecture." Received by Regueiro, Paz. 8 Dec. 2022.

²¹³ Joshi, 449; Cinelli, Matteo, et al. “The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, vol. 118, no. 9, 15 Nov. 2020.

culture. The consequence is a reticence to engage with the fringes of queer culture which resist assimilative normalization, which are not legible per the imposed limits of cishet hegemony. One is left wondering how some of the most foundational figures of our discipline would be received by today's queer youth, considering, for example, that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was a "gay-male-identified woman married to a man"²¹⁴, or that Leslie Feinberg, a transmasculine lesbian, used the neopronouns "zie/hir"²¹⁵. They embody the question: why does it not make more sense instead to destroy the categories of normal/abnormal rather than seeking to expand the definition of normal?

A wizened Waters offers this advice today to anti-conformists like him destined for a monstrous life of glorious queer failure: "Accept that something is wrong with you. It's a good start. Something has always been wrong with me, too. We're in a club of sorts, the lunatic fringe who are proud to band together²¹⁶". Waters and the queer monsters of his canon remind us that in the eyes of the normative, cishet beholder, all of us are "wrong"; all of us are monsters who must work to gain their respect. Therefore, what is the point of acquiescing? The risk of insisting upon queer inclusion into norms of respectability, a queer "seriousness" in paraphrase of Waters' words, is the erosion of solidarity with those of us trapped behind the boundaries defining it, a line which is ever moving back. For example, the ACLU has identified 321 bills seeking to limit the rights of queer people in the USA as of the 2023 legislative session. These include Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill which prohibits teachers from even mentioning queer identity in classrooms between kindergarten and third grade²¹⁷, or Oklahoma S.B.129 which would prohibit

²¹⁴ From Emily Apter's obituary for Sedgwick, "Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick." *Artforum International Magazine*, Artforum Inc., 1 Sept. 2009

²¹⁵ Minnie Bruce Pratt and Leslie Feinberg, "Self." *Leslie Feinberg*, Wordpress, 15 Nov. 2014.

²¹⁶ Waters, *Mr. Know-It-All*, 14.

²¹⁷ Jaclyn Diaz, "Florida's Governor Signs Controversial Law Opponents Dubbed 'Don't Say Gay'." *NPR*, National Public Radio, Inc., 28 Mar. 2022.

trans of people under the age of 26 from accessing gender-affirming healthcare²¹⁸. If social respect is only conferred through ever-shifting assimilative norms, the queer response must be to foster a mutual politics of liberation over mere inclusion. In Waters' own words, "Fighting with one another is weakening our pervert brand"²¹⁹. To point fingers at those of us deemed unrespectable and ultimately withhold our solidarity is precisely a part of the cisheterosexual project of assimilation via normalization. They want us to divide so they can conquer.

However, this is not to say that Waters' monsters should be understood as ideals, as models for queers the world over to mimic *in flagrante*. Lest we forget, Waters' films are populated by monsters committing some of the most heinous acts known to man: child abuse, human trafficking, cannibalism, forced pregnancy, rape, mass shootings, and more. Waters even admits that if Divine truly emulated the glamorous monster she depicts on-screen, she "would have been locked away in a mental institution years ago"²²⁰. As recently as 2022, he reflects that "many of the characters in [his] movies that say some of the funniest things take themselves so seriously. And they never question that their insane thoughts might be wrong in any way"²²¹. Without a doubt, Waters does not intend for audiences, queer or otherwise, to read his monsters as "good" representation of queer reality; to fail in reading the symbolism within his monsters is to take them at face value, with the queer seriousness he warns us against. What his queer monsters *do* represent is the world of infinite possibility delineated by queer failure, by a refusal to be marketable, normative, assimilable, and respectable. They suggest a liberatory politics of queer *anti*-normativity, as opposed to mere *non*-normativity, and remind us that though we exist

²¹⁸ Oklahoma, Senate Bill (SB) 129; Will Malloy. "New Anti-Trans Bills Could Force Trans Adults Like Me to Detransition." *Teen Vogue*, Condé Nast, 13 Jan. 2023.

²¹⁹ Waters via interview with Marchese, 2022.

²²⁰ Waters, *Shock Value*, 146.

²²¹ Waters via interview with Diamond, 2022.

as a “lunatic fringe”, we too “can be happy and fucked-up and still triumph, I promise you”²²².

Remember: as monsters, we too have the capacity to escape.

²²² Waters, *Mr. Know-It-All*, 13-14.

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