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# John Waters on the joy of bad taste – before the Trumps ruined it

As his still-shocking 1970s films are celebrated in a season at London’s BFI, the director remains defiant and unrepentant

**Tom Faber**

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John Waters at home in Baltimore, Maryland © Contour RA by Getty Images

The Trumps have ruined bad taste, the Pope of Trash has decreed. “Melania’s Christmas decorations were the last nail in the coffin,” he tells me. “It’s over. She killed it.”

The Pope, otherwise known as film director John Waters, knows a thing or two about vulgarity — and how much pleasure it can bring when done right.

Our conversation comes ahead of a new season at the British Film Institute celebrating “trash cinema”, a loosely defined genre that takes Waters’ films as its north star. While he would go on to find mainstream success with his 1988 film *Hairspray*, which was later adapted into a multi-award-winning Broadway musical juggernaut, Waters is best known among cinephiles for his 1970s run of taboo-shattering, stomach-turning, belly-laugh-inducing underground films, which still have the power to shock.

Divine and Jerry Stiller in ‘Hairspray’ (1988) © Alamy

It was William S Burroughs who anointed Waters the “Pope of Trash”, though he’s also gone by the “People’s Pervert” and the “Prince of Puke”. These days, at 79 and still sporting his trademark pencil moustache, he’s taken to calling himself a “Filth Elder”. Speaking via video call from his Baltimore home in a crimson scarf and a white woolly jacket, Waters proves a needle-sharp conversationalist, seated majestically in front of a wall of amateur fan art he’s received over the years. He likes the worst ones best.

Trash cinema originated with Waters’ 1969 film *Mondo Trasho*, he tells me, made at the same time that Andy Warhol collaborator Paul Morrissey was shooting 1970’s *Trash* (also in the BFI season). “Trash was a word that people were always saying negatively, so we embraced it to praise things, to say it was *good* bad taste. It was having fun with genre films, taking exploitation films and art films and putting them together.”

Since 1930, the Hays Code had ruled that sex, drugs and swearing had no place in the movies. All that good stuff needed somewhere to go, and found it in B-movies, exploitation flicks and genre films that played at seedy drive-ins and grindhouse cinemas. Waters’ recipe was to take the visceral, sensual pleasures and pulpy entertainment of those films and combine them with the intellectual sensibilities of European arthouse.

Divine in 1972’s ‘Pink Flamingos’

The BFI will screen Waters’ 1970 film ‘Multiple Maniacs’, in which Divine and friends go on a crime and sex spree

He recalls that risqué foreign films were treated the same as exploitation back then: “The Europeans broke all the censorship laws. Ingmar Bergman was shown in Baltimore as a sex movie. Fellini’s movies were shown as erotica. You got to look at women’s tits and drink espresso, that’s what it was like in the art cinema circuit.”

The BFI season contains a riot of films operating at this fertile intersection. They’re camp, DIY and made on shoestring budgets. They revel in bad taste and giddily subvert ideas of sex and gender. There’s the pulpy yet beautiful work of the pioneering weirdo Kuchar brothers; a film by “Godfather of Gore” Herschell Gordon Lewis called *Blood Feast* that offered audiences sick bags in its initial run; and Russ Meyer’s classic exploitation caper *Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill*! about a trio of go-go dancers on a violent rampage across the Californian desert. There are also examples of “so bad it’s good” cinema, such as the exploitation films of Doris Wishman, the only known female trash director, whose Chesty Morgan character smothered people to death with her outsized breasts. Perhaps best known is Ed Wood’s 1957 sci-fi horror *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, often called the worst film ever made.

At the centre of the programme are two of Waters’ own films; explorations of depravity, crime and perversion which he made with a group of Baltimore friends who called themselves Dreamland Studios. One of the actors, Mink Stole, who has appeared in every Waters feature film, will perform a live show at the BFI alongside drag queen Peaches Christ.

Waters’ most celebrated star was Divine, the imperious drag queen who fully embodied the anarchic energy of his scripts. Known for her severe make-up, Divine’s raw edginess inspired generations of drag performers and was the basis for Ursula, the villain in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*. “She was a drag terrorist against hippie values,” Waters says. “Divine was my Godzilla and my Elizabeth Taylor put together.” Tragically, Divine died just weeks after the premiere of *Hairspray* in 1988, barely living long enough to enjoy her first taste of mainstream success.

Waters in Austin, Texas, 1976 © Getty Images

The Dreamland crew worked hard to promote their early films, which would show in colleges, rented theatres and — surprisingly for films so explicitly blasphemous — church basements. As well as extensive flyering, their promotion included surreal stunts. “Divine would appear before movies, I’d introduce her, she’d throw dead fish in the audience,” Waters recalls with a cackle. “One time, we had a fake cop arrest us and Divine strangled the cop and then the movie started. Another time, we left unrefrigerated ground beef under the seats. It was like vaudeville.”

The BFI will screen Waters’ 1970 film *Multiple Maniacs*, in which Divine and pals go on a crime and sex spree, rejoicing in the depravity of rape, cannibalism, lobster sex and a “rosary job” on a church pew. Waters calls it “a horror film that glorified violence in the peace and love years.”

*Pink Flamingos* (1972), Waters’ most notorious film, takes things a step further. At the time, Variety called it “one of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made” — surely good for ticket sales. The film follows Divine’s battle with a couple called the Marbles, each vying to be known as the “filthiest person alive”. Waters recalls: “*Deep Throat* had just come out, hard porn was legal, there was nothing left. So we said: what can you do that isn’t illegal that nobody’s done?”

Quite a lot, as it turns out. Even 50 years on, *Pink Flamingos* remains an incendiary watch, with incest, chicken sex, baby-farming and a climactic scene in which Divine eats a real dog turd fresh from the source in a single, unbroken take, grinning all the while. “We did that last scene as terrorism,” crows Waters. “I knew that nobody could leave that theatre and not talk about it, even if they hated the movie.”

These two films were made during the Nixon administration. “Today is much worse than Nixon with Trump,” says Waters. “The difference is that Nixon cared when he was facing impeachment. He cared when there were marches. Trump loves when he gets impeached and loves that we hate him, so he’s harder to fight.” For all that, there is something of a Waters character in such shamelessness — in his films, it’s always the lunatics who embrace their own lunacy who win in the end.

Waters went on to make movies through the 1990s and early 2000s, but hasn’t directed a film since 2004’s *A Dirty Shame*. He tells me he has developed many projects since then, including an adaptation of his novel *Liarmouth* starring Aubrey Plaza and — improbably — a children’s Christmas animation (both stalled due to financing woes). “I’m willing to make a new film, but I’m not going to make a movie on a budget that I can’t do,” he says. “I’m not setting myself up to fail. I’m almost 80 years old, I’m not making an underground movie.”

John Waters being honoured with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, September 2023 © Variety via Getty Images

Even without a new film, Waters says he’s busier than ever, making visual art, writing, acting and touring his spoken word show (59 shows last year, he tells me).

He is also more appreciated by the artistic establishment than ever before. His “sick” films have gone from church basements to the esteemed Criterion Collection. In 2023 he was honoured with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (as one online commenter put it: “Finally, he’s closer to the gutter than ever.”) Waters himself is appalled. “I mean, how would *I* ever win an award?” he says. “I’m so respectable I could puke.”

Could showing his provocative films at venerable institutions like the BFI detract from their transgressive power? “Not at all,” he grins wickedly. “It just gives it another layer of lunacy.”

*‘Trash! The Wildest Films You’ve Ever Seen’, to April 30, BFI Southbank, London, bfi.org.uk; John Waters’ US tour continues, johnwaterstour.com*

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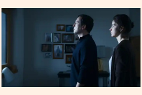

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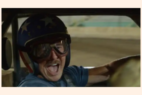

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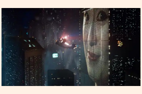

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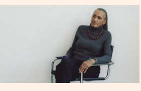

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