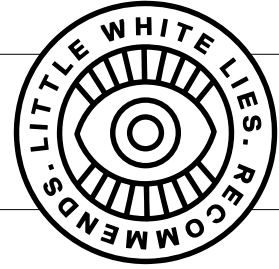




Directed by **JOHN WATERS**
Starring **DIVINE, DAVID LOCHARY,**
MINK STOLE
Released **17 MARCH, 1972**



Pink Flamingos

John Waters' canonical index of bodily transgressions and hyper-kitsch pranks has been much imitated but never bettered. So happy 50th birthday to a masterpiece of wanton degradation that's also a charming document of good friends just having fun.

A beat-up mobile home is plonked in barren rural Maryland. Its after-market paint job is soot grey, matte, drab as the bald trees out back (we really are in “the sticks”). The whole tableau would be quite depresso were it not for the statement-pastel panels wrapped around the trailer in Pepto-Bismol pink – the same shade as the flamboyance of plastic flamingos standing sentinel to this, Pandora’s trash can. Inside lurk suburban sex pests, gender gremlins, an egg fetishist and the filthiest person alive – tabloid certified! They’re ready and waiting to perform – per the film’s tagline – “an exercise in poor taste”.

First uncaged in 1972, *Pink Flamingos* details the exploits of two warring filthfluencer clans: one, a loud-mouthed household led by a psychopathic drag queen; the other, a pair of clout-chasing sadist baby-farmers with a taste for toes. As the ne’er-do-well nemeses hunt each other across Baltimore, they revel in all manner of dirty deeds to get their coveted column inches. Mixing *Looney Tunes* humour with DIY gore and a penchant for porno chic mores, the polarising film is reviled and revered as a prototypical midnight movie and exemplar of “abject art”.

Pink Flamingos was written, directed, produced, narrated, shot and edited by Maryland miscreant John Waters. Aged 25 at the time, he borrowed \$12,000 from his Dad to make a low-budget collision of ’50s kitsch pastiche and ’70s queer politics. The final product was both an avant-garde art film fit for the experimental circuit, and a trashtastic jeremiad against America’s conservative status quo.

In its golden anniversary year, the film’s reputation as a controversial cult classic endures. Many cinephiles are familiar with the story of its coprophilic finale, even if they’re yet to see the real deal (high quality digital copies of the film were rare as hen’s teeth prior to the Criterion Collection’s recent 4K restoration). So, 50 years on from its initial release, what can be learned from Waters’ notorious missive?

Let’s return to that wayward mobile home (pronounced “moo-bill hoom” for comic effect) on the outskirts of Phoenix, MD. Its criminal occupants are matriarch Divine (the femme alter-ego of hairdresser Glenn Milstead), her adult son Crackers (Danny Mills), the family’s infantile grandma Edie (Edith Massey, a Waters stalwart) and their travelling



companion Cotton (the director's childhood best friend, Mary Vivian Pearce). The fugitive crew is on the lam, so Divine – both a character within the film, and the actor's real-world drag persona – assumes the pseudonym 'Babs Johnson' to evade Johnny Law and the evening papers.

Meanwhile, in suburban Baltimore, sickeningly middle-class married couple Connie and Raymond Marble (more of the filmmaker's friends: Mink Stole and David Lochary) turn green with envy upon discovering that local rag *The Midnight* has pronounced Divine, "The filthiest person alive!" Apoplectic that their thriving small business – a black market baby ring hawking newborns to lesbian couples – has been unjustly snubbed, the go-getting Marbles hatch a plan to snatch Divine's grimy crown. The plot devolves into a series of increasingly perverse pranks, gotchas and booby traps. It culminates in a kangaroo court-cum-prince conference and, you guessed it, multiple public executions.

Pink Flamingos doesn't exactly ring with the technical prowess that most base-level American films tend to offer as standard. Waters' portable 16mm camera recorded sound directly onto the film stock, 24 frames ahead of the picture. That's ideal for playback through a projector, but effectively useless when it comes to splicing multiple takes of the same scene. As such, much of the action unfurls in master shots, with camera operator Waters panning across faces, or shonkily zooming in and out, searching for pertinent details.

These lengthy takes also mean that, when cuts between scenes do arrive, they announce themselves with the subtlety of blunt force trauma. Though mostly game, the players occasionally cross the frame with a tinge of clumsy discomfort. This seems partly due to messy blocking, but also because the shooting locations – especially those in and around the trailer – appear to be colder than a witch's tit. By and large, *Pink Flamingos* looks, sounds and feels like a labour of love, cobbled together on a wing and a prayer by enthusiastic amateurs – because that's exactly what it was.

Most of the cast, as noted, are Waters' bosom buddies from Baltimore traps like the downtown gay and beatnik scenes. Many had worked on the director's previous films, and would continue to serve at the Pope of Trash's altar, even as he veered toward the (comparative) mainstream further on down the track. They earned their own nickname, The Dreamlanders, in honour of Waters' company, Dreamland Productions. A more sordid answer to Warhol's superstars, the Dreamlanders engage goblin mode in *Pink Flamingos*, cussing and fucking and chewing (or, rather, licking) the scenery. They spew histrionic dialogue with speed-freak intensity, which lends this exploitation flick a sense of hysterical melodrama more befitting of a pre-World War Two 'woman's picture'. MVP is Divine, who spouts Mae West-esque witticisms with all the salty self-assurance of a veteran Hollywood glamour puss.

The so-called filthiest person alive is also a sight to behold, and this film produced arguably her most iconic image. Her hair starts halfway to the back of her scalp, bleached and teased into a sunflower bouffant with a few inches of seedy regrowth. This receding hairline makes way for the batwing eyebrows flying up and off her forehead. She wears a fire engine red frock, replete with fishtail frill, and cocks a pistol at the viewer, egging them to look upon her with shame, disgust or disdain. Just try it. (Credit also to Waters' costume designer Van Smith and art director Vincent Peranio, as the film's vivacious visual style belies its shoestring budget.)

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While it is said that one cannot polish a turd, Waters' joyful specimen suggests that you can at least gift wrap it. From there, it's just a matter of getting it into the hands of the right people.

Following a sold-out premiere at the University of Baltimore, *Pink Flamingos*' fledgling distributor New Line Cinema winged the film into New York City's Elgin Theater, where Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970) had been a midnight mainstay in 1971. Pitched at college potheads, long-haired dropouts and other denizens of the counterculture, the cinematic depravity was hyped by a trailer that used no actual footage from the film itself – just a slew of bewitched and titillated talking heads reacting to the smut *du jour*. The final soundbite comes from a bespectacled young man in a cowboy hat. “I think John Waters has got his finger on the pulse of America,” he says. “I think he's got his thumb securely on America's ass.”

Pink Flamingos was spawned in a primordial soup that brimmed with fixins like Nixon, the Vietnam War, the Golden Age of Porn, the Manson Family rampage and subsequent trial, the Stonewall riots, and much more. By 1970, the sun had well and truly set on the Summer of Love. Wrath and dissatisfaction were waxing, particularly in marginalised communities.

As the Black power, gay liberation and feminist movements pushed forward, conservative Middle America clung ever more tightly to the white picket fences of post-war prosperity. The ironically named Dreamlanders found peace not in the suburban homogeneity of their childhoods, but in a gleeful creative chaos of their own design.

With tongue in cheek and rose between teeth, Waters serves up the West's most pressing obsessions – sex, violence and nostalgia – at a bacchanalian carnival for queers, delinquents and outcasts. In a film that depicts masturbation, animal cruelty, cannibalism, castration, forced pregnancy, incest and rape (often for laughs), one of the most memorable scenes sees Divine in a leopard print wiggle dress passing by the stars and stripes as it flaps on a flagpole while Little Richard sings “The Girl Can't Help It” – ‘it’ being shoplifting a steak between her thighs. Waters is a master in the art of transgression, and he's also an authority in the practice of play.

From the 1950s rock ‘n’ roll needle drops (which he initially used sans permission) to the Marbles' hyper-colour hairdos (the carpets match the drapes) and the ribald dialogue (“You fucking little dingleberry!”), *Pink Flamingos* is frequently silly, in an almost childlike way. Beyond Edie's playpen, the film embraces nudity, injury, swearing, gluttony and, of course, bowel movements, without a whiff of shame. A sense of freedom ferments throughout what is, at heart, the hippie equivalent of theatre kids putting on skits for their friends.

‘Unapologetic authenticity’ is the watermark to which today's influencers aspire, but there's a disingenuity to eating clean on curated feeds. Even once radical spaces like drag and Pride are prone to the clucking tongues of imposed respectability. As capitalism finds new ways to commodify queer culture, we sashay away from the term's subversive intent – the one hitting full flight in *Pink Flamingos*. Given the sanitised state of today's conglomerate pop media, this film's greatest gift is its zero-tolerance policy on hypocrisy, a crime here punishable by death.

AIMEE KNIGHT

ANTICIPATION

In an age of Devil's advocates and provocateurs, how will this glory hole hold up?

4

ENJOYMENT

If the trailer's a-rockin', do come a-knockin' – with forewarnin'. It's a lot.

5

IN RETROSPECT

Be gay, do crime.

5