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the john waters one

a gay ill history zine number seven.

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TRASH

The misfits from Baltimore County who changed film forever



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People in our community rarely get an opportunity to learn our history, so I want it to be as available as I can make it. I also want to make it fun, a lot of this history is really ridiculous in a sort of melodramatic, campy way.

If you want to get into the nitty-gritty, if you want nuance, and you don't mind reading something a little more serious and dry, you should check out my website at www.mdhistory.gay, it has a few longer, boring, more academic articles and links to that statewide study. If you like it, please let me know! If you don't, well, you can't say I didn't warn you.

If you have questions about these stories or queer history in general, I can be reached through my history Instagram:

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about me:

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That doesn't mean we shouldn't still uphold and celebrate John Waters or the culture his films drew from and portrayed. It means we need to do the same for the people and communities of today's Baltimore who are pushed out of view whenever the cameras are around. And in today's Baltimore, that largely means the city's Black communities, subcultures, and artists. And we're lucky to have a wealth of innovative Black artists bringing their perspectives to the world, and as always, queer artists are at the forefront.

Finally, I think there's a lesson that we should push back on the idea that Baltimore needs to be portrayed in a certain way. Waters' films portrayed everything that was embarrassing about Baltimore and made it a badge of honor. The next piece of film or writing or art to elevate the city won't do so by sanitizing its view of Baltimore and its people. It will do so by celebrating the people and cultures that get ignored in the official story.

And personally? I can't wait to see it.

And while we're on the subject of seeing things, I would like to remind you that while *Pink Flamingos* was more influential and successful, *Female Trouble* is still plenty violent and disgusting, holds up better, and is a better script and better movie technically.

Even Judith Butler thinks so.

And they know pretty much everything.

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TRASH:

The Baltimore County misfits who changed cinema and taught us how to be queer

by ben egerman

June 2026

Note: This zine centers on the film "Pink Flamingos." It's an important film, an influential film, and not a film I would recommend for a lot of reasons. Personally, my favorite is "Female Trouble," made a few years later.

This zine is about the absolute insanity that is the 1972 film *Pink Flamingos* by John Waters, starring Divine, and its shocking cult success. The film more or less invented the concept of both the midnight movie and a cult film. It made an overweight drag queen with insane makeup into a gay icon, established John Waters as America's premier merchant of bad taste, and helped define a DIY look and spirit that directly influenced the earliest punk musicians and fans.

And honestly, no other film (except possibly *Paris is Burning*) has had a greater influence on queer culture. That's my opinion, at least. But I'm right. No further questions.

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Now, I have a confession to make: I wasn't born in Baltimore. I grew up in Massachusetts and lived in the Midwest before moving here in 2016. I quickly fell in love with the city and with a nice local boy and the rest is gay little history.

But before moving here, I knew a bit about Baltimore. Because 9 or 10 years earlier, I watched a few very strange gross-out movies and fell in love with them. I knew Baltimore as a place full of weird accents, ridiculous hairstyles, and pure, unadulterated filth. And it was all because of a small group of queer weirdos and freaks.

That's the joy of living in the only city where the biggest cultural export is a trailblazing queer filmmaker who created some of the most gloriously disgusting movies of all time. For millions of people, especially queer folks, Baltimore is a magical place obsessed with rats and roaches, leopard print everything, and perverts of every stripe. I once saw an alt drag performer from South America at the Baltimore Eagle excitedly announce that his first US show had happened in "LA CIUDAD DE JOHN WATERS, EL PAPA DE LA BASURA!!!" The world over, that is how queer people know Baltimore.

It's one of many nicknames Waters has gotten over the years: the Sultan of Sleaze, the Baron of Bad Taste, the Prince of Puke. I personally like The Pope of Trash though, because it implies that there was a conclave of lesser Trash

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It's why Divine's look from the film is still one of the most easily recognizable images of drag in film over 50 years later and why Waters has remained relevant to queer people born decades after it was released. It's also why like every third queer person in Baltimore has a tattoo of her or another Waters figure.

What's more interesting to me is the influence that Waters has had on Baltimore. It's pretty difficult to think of Baltimore's image and culture without the massive success of Dreamland's films from *Flamingos* onward. It's hard to think of Baltimore as a kind of uptight, conservative factory town, but that's largely how it was seen before the 70s. What Waters did was elevate a part of Baltimore's culture that had been pushed under the rug, that was considered embarrassing and low-class, and make his twisted, queer vision of it the most well-known images of the city for most of the world.

We now live in a very different Baltimore; one where Waters has long since won that culture war. Neighborhoods and festivals go all-in on the type of kooky, trashy, working class white Baltimore that populates Waters' films, seeing it as a safe and palatable image for a high-crime, majority-Black city. Waters himself has gone from being a transgressive outsider to a mainstream figure, and the same is true of his portrayal of Baltimore.

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That's a good thing. Yeah, Judith Butler isn't exactly known for being easy to read.

And it bears noting that at the same time, a crop of young filmmakers like Gus Van Sant, Greg Araki, and Pedro Almodovar, creating what was called "the New Queer Cinema," all described *Pink Flamingos* as a primary influence.



That's how a disgusting shock comedy made by a Baltimore pervert and his merry band of drag queens, druggies, and degenerates changed cinema, defined punk rock fashion, and became a kind of stand-in for the shock tactics and transgressive mockery of gender of the 90s queer movement as it de-

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Cardinals at some point who elected him. Probably some Filth Bishops under them.

But you don't become the Pope of Trash overnight. Some would say that the story began with *Pink Flamingos* in 1972, which is still arguably the most infamous movie ever made in America. But here in Maryland, their story starts in the 1960s, with suburban teenagers skipping school to indulge in their favorite hobbies: watching movies and getting high.



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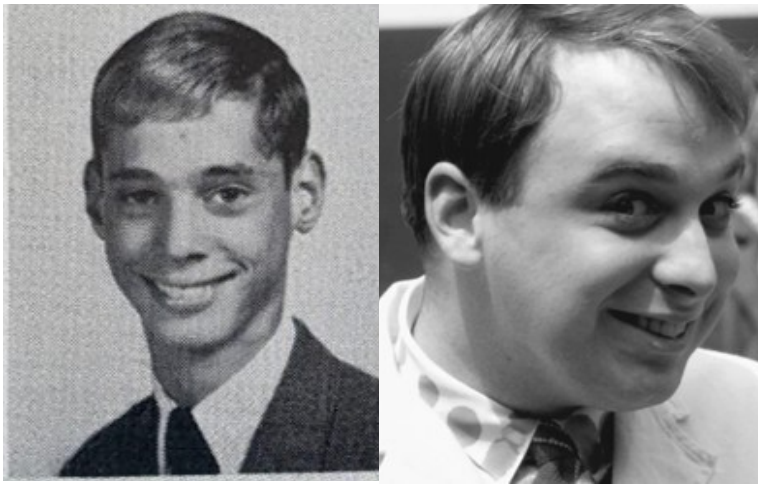
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John Waters and Divine at age 16.

**PART ONE:
NOT-SO-STRAIGHT OUTTA LUTHERVILLE-TIMONIUM**

The scene: Lutherville-Timonium, early 1963. Two respectable, conservative, upper-middle class parents are worried about their 16-year-old son John. He was barely scraping by at a catholic boy's school (Calvert Hall), regularly cutting class to go to movie theatres. He would take binoculars to a hill by the drive-in to see B-movies. He would sneak out to see the sideshows at the State Fair and had even hitchhiked to New York to see experimental films by Andy Warhol and Ken-

statement about societal norms: that they were hypocritical bullshit.

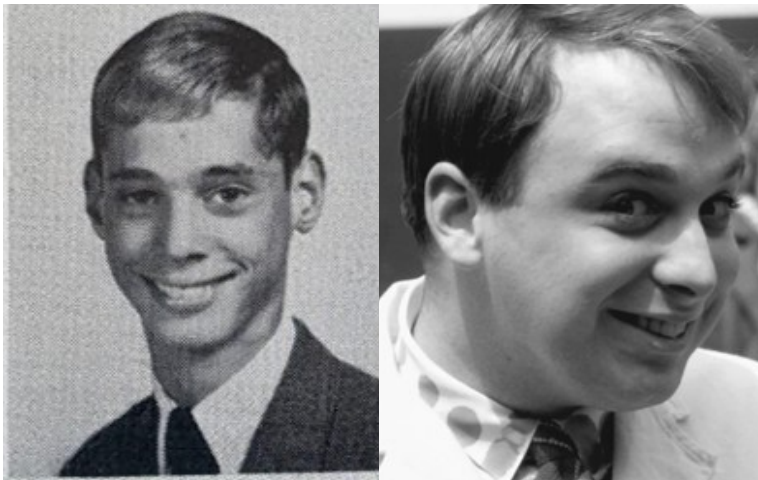
It isn't coincidental. A lot of our ideas and language around queerness go back to two groups in the early 90s: first, militant activists in ACT-UP and especially Queer Nation, whose irreverent, in-your-face actions and literature showed a new style of LGBTQ+ activism and worked to reclaim the term with slogans like "We're Here! We're Queer! Get Used to It!" Themselves heavily influenced by political punk subcultures, these queer activists, zine-makers, and artists from the earliest days onwards have used the image of Divine as a stand-in for their transgressive, radical politics.



Judith Butler in their twink era

At the same time, feminist academics were writing about a new set of ideas they called "queer theory." Most influential was Judith Butler's 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*, which argued that gender was not an innate trait, but a performance that should be rejected and subverted.

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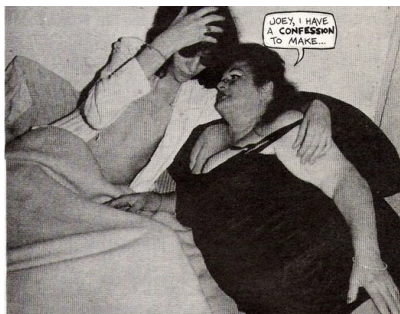


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Edith Massey makes an appearance with Joey Ramone in *Punk* magazine, 1978

And many of the things that made the film such a sensation articulate a certain attitude we associate with queerness: It was gleefully transgressive. It celebrated deviance and rejected the mainstream. It consciously fucked with gender. It mocked conservative cultural norms with shocking, outrageous camp. It was in-your-face. It was DIY. And it turned mainstream values on their head: the most beautiful woman in the world was a 300-pound drag queen; the most glamorous people looked like freaks, the queers and outsiders and weirdos were the heroes every time. It all made a not-so-subtle

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His parents weren't thrilled with his friends either, the core group being Mary Vivian Pearce, a serial private-school expellee and compulsive gambler; Mona Montgomery, a dedicated shoplifter; Glen Milstead, an overweight and flamboyant teenager who financed elaborate hotel dinner parties with fake IDs and bad checks; and David Lochary, a high school dropout who had introduced Glen to drag and transformed him into Elizabeth Taylor.

And their social world was expanding. John had somehow gotten his mother to drive him to **Martick's**, Baltimore's premier haunt for artists, homosexuals, and bohemians. There the teenagers encountered barflies, beatniks, and self-proclaimed freaks of every variety, getting their first taste of a world far removed from suburban Lutherville. Too young to get in, they spent most of their time in the alley trying to convince adults to buy them drinks.

The beats were known for a lot of things, like berets, experimental poetry, and heavy drug use; it was the last part the teens were most excited about. They learned which of the regulars at Marticks they could buy weed from. John and a friend started skipping school to take speed and watch foreign films back to back all day. Mary Vivian Pearce once went door to door in Towson pretending to be raising money for UNICEF so they could buy acid that a friend had stolen from Sheppard Pratt psychiatric hospital.

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Which is how, for his 17th birthday, John Waters' grandmother gave him his first movie camera.

You know, to keep him out of trouble.



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CONCLUSION: FILTH IS MY POLITICS

It's hard to overstate the cultural influence that *Pink Flamingos* has had in the five decades since its release, but I'm doing my darndest anyway with this zine when I write things like it is the single most enduring cultural touchstone for transgression and queerness in film history. Its influence goes far beyond this, but its main influences were seen in two movements: the punks of the late 70s onward, and the queer movement of the early 1990s.

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showings and finding them all selling well, increasing it until they were showing it at midnight 7 days a week. New Line started selling art theatres across the country on the idea, and their results were similar. As it turns out, there was a crowd willing to see weird, transgressive movies at midnight in every city in America.

After a few months, the owner of the New York theatre started noticing something new—there was a growing group of people who were seeing the show over and over; some groups started dressing up like characters, and audiences were shouting out their favorite lines at the screen. He said at first, it was mostly young gay people from hip downtown neighborhoods, but soon broadened and drew hordes of gays, straights, wealthy suburbanites, working class kids, you name it. For all of them, seeing *Pink Flamingos* had become a rite of passage, a dare, a statement that they weren't squeamish or uptight, and a celebration of everything weird.

The same kind of crowds were forming in cities nationwide, making *Pink Flamingos* the first widely screened, commercially successful midnight movie, and was the first cult movie in the sense we think of it today. The scene it created wound up producing other cult classics several years later like David Lynch's *Eraserhead* and most famously, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It launched the career of Waters, Divine, and everyone else in the movie, and proved that audiences were ready for underground, alternative, weird,

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PART TWO: THE EARLY FILMS

With camera in hand, John set about making his first movie, called *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, which already showed his unique blend of taboo-breaking and absurdity. The 15-minute film, made at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, stars Mona as a white woman who falls in love with a Black man, marries him on a rooftop in a ceremony officiated by a Klansman, and is interrupted by a lewd dance number from Mary Vivian Pearce. The film only played once, at a small coffeeshop. It made \$30, which was more than it cost. Because Mona had a job at a camera shop and stole all the film from work.

Despite barely graduating from high school in 1964, John was accepted into NYU's film school and moved off to New York City. There, he quickly decided that film classes were dull, and stopped going, instead spending all his time, big shocker, going to see movies—experimental, horror, sexploitation, you name it. He paid for the tickets by stealing textbooks from the NYU bookstore and then reselling them back as used.

Less than a semester in, he and six other students became some of the first college students anywhere to be expelled for smoking weed. He was told to pack his things quick: his parents were already driving up from Baltimore. The expelled students were told to never tell anyone what had happened, so naturally John immediately phoned a tabloid solely to em-

7

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Less than a semester in, he and six other students became some of the first college students anywhere to be expelled for smoking weed. He was told to pack his things quick: his parents were already driving up from Baltimore. The expelled students were told to never tell anyone what had happened, so naturally John immediately phoned a tabloid solely to em-

7

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In the summer of 1965, John and Mona decided to hitchhike north to Provincetown, Massachusetts on (just the) tip of Cape Cod, then in the process of going from a bohemian artists' colony into a popular gay beach town. The two of them resumed their shoplifting spree there, and John found a senile doctor who would prescribe diet pills for the rail-thin 19-year-old that he could then sell as speed. After Mona moved back to Baltimore, John spent the rest of his time in P-Town with two sisters from Towson he had met named Sique and Nancy Stoll. After the summer, he and Nancy moved back to Baltimore and rented a place together.

The next year, *Roman Candles*, a chaotic experimental film inspired by Andy Warhol, introduced the name Dreamland Productions. Waters expanded his cast to include more of his friends, and gave two performers the names they would keep forever: Nancy Stoll became Mink Stole, and Glen Milstead was credited as Lady Divine.

The premiere was held at Emmanuel Episcopal

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ly are only two types of people in the world: my type of people, and assholes." Meanwhile, by watching everything that was too vile and shocking for Hollywood or mainstream society and laughing and cheering at it, the audience was demonstrating how little they cared about these rules of what was and wasn't appropriate—something that deeply unnerved film critics at the time.

And by being so inappropriate, so offensive, so disgusting that it needed to be seen—if you loved it, you told everyone you knew that they needed to see it. If you hated it, you told everyone you knew about how disgusting it was, and they would wonder, "can it really be that bad?" Millions have watched the film over the years with one question in mind: "she doesn't really eat that at the end, right?" As film critics denounced the film as tasteless and crude, Dreamland would proudly display the quotes on their marketing material. An early trailer simply rolled interviews of shocked theatregoers after seeing it. Everyone wanted to know what the fuss was all about.

After a bit of time, John successfully got New Line Cinema, then a small distributor, to try the film at a midnight showing at the Elgin, an art theatre in Manhattan. After a half-full opening, he convinced the theatre owner to try again the next week—and discovered a line around the block waiting for tickets. It had spread entirely via word-of-mouth. The theatre started adding more midnight

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a poster for the premier

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Church in Mt. Vernon, where a "slightly eccentric" reverend allowed Waters to screen the film because he believed anything creative that got young people into church was worthwhile. Which is to say, he never saw any of the movies. The Dreamlanders, as they started to be called, were masters of guerilla marketing, scheduling the premiere at the same time as the Mt. Vernon Flower Market, and having everyone dress as flamboyantly and outrageously as possible to cause a scene while handing out flyers. There were three showings—all were sold out.



Over the next several years, Waters and the Dreamlanders produced a string of increasingly outrageous films. *Eat Your Makeup* involved women being kidnapped and forced to model themselves to death, but the real kicker was a dream sequence in which they reenact the JFK assassination (only a few years afterwards) with Divine chewing up the scenery as Jackie Kennedy. The cast and Waters reveled

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The premiere was again held at Emmanuel Church, and screened for nine sold-out showings. More importantly, the publicity had brought Waters to the attention of a new independent film distributor which successfully got the film shown at a theatre in Los Angeles. LA papers and a number of national film and entertainment magazines reviewed it positively.

and sell babies on the black market to lesbian couples, all in order to finance their side project, an "inner-city heroin ring catering to high school students." What follows is an escalating war of bad taste involving kidnapping, sex trafficking, bestiality, incest, and general perversion, until Divine ties the Marbles up and invites the media to watch her convict them of "assholeism," then execute them. As the family is leaving to start a new life in Boise, Idaho, the song "how much is that doggie in the window?" plays as they see a dog take a shit and Divine eats it, then smiles right at the camera.

So, not exactly what I might call Hallmark material.

The premiere was held at the 3rd Baltimore Film Festival, held at the University of Baltimore. The cast and crew advertised by postering throughout town, while releases were sent to local film critics advertising it as "an exercise in bad taste." Waters' films were already known in Baltimore, and he wasn't surprised to sell out every showing. He realized quickly that the film would work nationally when he saw that the audience was laughing, or screaming in horror, or groaning, or gagging, and giving the film a standing ovation each time while shaking their heads in disbelief.

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Filming took place between the trailer and the apartment John and Mink were living in at 3800 Greenmount Ave. The trailer location was hard—there was no heat, no running water, and electricity was provided by running a string of extension cords nearly a mile back to the collective's house. Filming took place in winter, in temperatures as low as 25 degrees. To keep costs low, he hired news cameramen from WJZ to "borrow" their gear from work on their days off, which John would then use to film.

Dreamland's costumes, hair and makeup was done by Van Smith, who created Divine's iconic look, shaving his hair back to the crown in order to add giant eyeliner and eyebrows—or as John put it, "there simply wasn't enough room on the human face for the amount of eye makeup Van wanted for Divine." For the Marbles' iconic hair, Mink Stole bleached her hair and then added pure red ink to her shampoo. David Lochary, whose hair was always bleached white, simply took apart blue magic markers and rubbed them over his head.



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The film centered on Divine, now firmly established as the star of the Dreamlanders, who runs a murderous sideshow with her cheating husband. She goes to a church for guidance, but is seduced by a perverted nun hiding in a confessional booth who gives her a "rosary job." They kill the husband together, before Divine carves out and eats his heart. She is then sexually assaulted by a giant lobster, rampages through the streets, and is shot dead by the national guard. I know, classic hollywood story, classic hollywood ending.



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The film again sold out every show in Baltimore, but the publicity of the arrest had brought Dreamland a higher profile, and John was approached by a distributor who arranged a tour of 16 cities, starting in LA, for midnight showings—when material too artsy, niche, violent, or lewd were often screened. He and David set off in his car and drove to California, where the LA shows were a success and the film was positively reviewed.

But the turning point came in San Francisco, then at the forefront of both counterculture and gay liberation. There they connected with the Cockettes, a troupe of psychedelic queer hippies performing



often before the evening's midnight movie, to devoted crowds at the Palace Theater. They adored *Multiple Maniacs* and immediately asked if Divine could fly out for the opening. She did, and performed an act John had written where she strangled a cop to death after announcing that Charles Manson was innocent: she had really killed Sharon Tate. It was a massive hit. The Palace began regularly showing the film and Divine moved to San Francisco. Meanwhile, one of his times driving to California with David Lochary, John started spotting trailer parks and became obsessed with characters who might live in a trailer that was tackier and trashier than any he had seen.

12



PART THREE: THE MOST DISGUSTING MOVIE EVER MADE

After the success of *Multiple Maniacs*, in 1971, John Waters again asked for a loan from his father, this time for \$10,000, and again his father reluctantly agreed. They bought a trailer and set about bringing it to a rural area north of Baltimore behind the house of a collective of "draft dodgers, drug dealers, and homosexuals," where it was painted and prepped. The cast was brought back to Baltimore, some living in New York, Provincetown, and San Francisco to start work on a new film: *Pink Flamingos*.

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