THE ‘FILM’ ON WHITENESS
Depicting White Trash in U.S. Film, 1972-2002

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PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines various aspects of whiteness and white trash as it relates to films made between 1972 and 2002. Key to this discussion are the concepts of race and class because whiteness invokes race, and trash invokes class. How is white trash represented in cinema? To begin answering this question, one must call into question a conceptual framework of ‘privileged whiteness’ because when upper-middle-class whiteness is forced to recognise itself, a crisis occurs whereby whiteness can become trashed. This thesis argues from the outset that little distance exists between privileged whiteness and white trash because this ongoing ‘crisis’ maintains a proximity between both terms.

The sometimes difficult relationship between privileged whiteness and white trash is explored in filmic case studies. A discussion of white trash must go beyond race and class, because place, age and sexuality also play a large part in making sense of the way white trash functions on screen. Filmic representations often position white trash within a set of conventions that maintains its inherent criminality and deviance. On the flipside are conventions that paradoxically stage white trash as both authentic and performed. Through a detailed analysis of various films I question what such conventions mean, and how one might either engage with them or move beyond them.

The second half of this thesis identifies specific modes of cinematic white trash production. These are camp white trash and queer white trash. In the former, the films of John Waters are discussed within a framework of
“camp/trash aesthetics”. The latter looks at queer white trash through a detailed analysis of the 1990’s New Queer Cinema. Lastly, this thesis argues that the films discussed contribute to a concept of White Trash Cinema.
ACADEMIC DECLARATION

This dissertation has not been submitted for higher degree at any other institution.

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INTRODUCTION
OFF-WHITE

You're so low, you make white trash look positively top drawer.

America is a big melting pot because when you bring it to the boil, the scum rises to the top.
— Jim Jarmusch, Down By Law (1986).

I wanna have sex at the top so I'll know what America's like at the bottom.
— Paul Morrissey, Women in Revolt (1971).

The three quotes above, all taken from dialogue spoken in American films, suggest very similar things about the distinction between bottom/top or low/high culture.¹ In particular, they speak to the way class and race is figured in the United States. These bytes of dialogue are all spoken by so-called white trash characters who inhabit white trash movies. White trash is commonly associated with low culture, and consequently anything that is not white trash must "rise" above it.

But how do we account for the plethora of white trash representations in contemporary American cinema? The visibility of white trash representations in U.S. cinema suggests that the category of white trash has transcended its marginal, culturally invisible status. How did white trash suddenly become "top

¹ In relation to culture, such terms like 'high' and 'low' are increasingly loaded in meaning and have been explored at length by authors such as Kirk Varnedoe (1992). In my dissertation, 'low' and 'high' have been deployed as general terms because my primary focus is not so much whether white trash is actually low culture. Instead, my emphasis is about the multiple ways we might conceptualise white trash.
drawer”? Has it really “risen to the top”? Or do contemporary filmic representations simply reinforce stereotypes that white trash is low, scum, criminal, deviant, primitive, hokey and simple-minded? If this is so, how do we account for the ways in which white trash is also represented as the heroic underdog or the ‘noble savage’? Arguably, these depictions can also be stereotypical. This dissertation will go some way in answering these questions by looking at representations of white trash in film. In this dissertation I will be concerned with the whiteness— or off-whiteness—of identity in contemporary American film. The earliest example that will be examined in depth is Pink Flamingos, which was made in 1972. The most recent films examined at length, O Brother, Where Art Thou? and Hedwig and the Angry Inch are from 2001, which limits my time frame to a period of almost thirty years. Some other films, mentioned in passing, pre-date 1972.

The current wave of U.S. films concerned with white trash demonstrates the obsession U.S. culture has with white poverty. This obsession is expressed, paradoxically, as both ridicule and celebration. White trash has become a cinematic and popular culture phenomenon. Indeed it has become so pervasive that increasing amounts of scholarship and criticism have addressed the phenomenon.\textsuperscript{2} As yet, however, no over-arching survey and analysis has

\textsuperscript{2} Examples include White Trash: Race and Class in America (eds. Wray and Newitz, 1997). This book features essays on white trash and film by Constance Penley, Annalee Newitz and Mike Hill, and other non-filmic essays by the likes of Barbara Ching and John Hartigan Jr. The Road Movie Book (eds. Cohan and Hark) includes some essays that address the identity politics of some white trash road movies. Other notable examples of white trash scholarship are J.W. Williamson (1995) and Gael Sweeney (2001). Included as part of the Society for Cinema Studies Annual Conference (Washington D.C., May 24-27, 2001) was a panel on white trash film chaired by Elena Gorfinkel and Ara Osterweil.
systematically investigated the idiom of white trash in film, a gap this
dissertation aims to bridge.

The category of white trash certainly refers to the real lived conditions of
poor whites, but it appears to have gained cultural currency and popularity in
the U.S. and elsewhere because of its repeated depiction in popular culture.
Popular forms of entertainment including film, TV, music and fashion, have
represented white trash in a multiplicity of ways, some of which are challenging
and critical, while others keep white trash trapped in a racist and classist web.
The work of John Waters is an example of the former classification of white trash
because his cinematic narratives are preoccupied with spectacularising and
celebrating the campy excess of white trash. Perhaps the white trash
phenomenon in U.S. cinema has a lot to do with the recognition Waters has
received for his pioneering work. The origins of this cinematic phenomenon are
contentious and debatable, but one thing remains certain: white trash film is a
legitimate and important area of academic enquiry because it functions as a
reminder that white identity is a visible and marked entity that cares greatly
about its relationship to class categories. White trash films matter because they
reinforce the ways in which U.S. culture often articulates its obsession with the
class and race signifiers of whiteness through the category of white trash.

Defining White Trash and Whiteness

White trash is not only a cinematic category. The term white trash has been
circulating in U.S. culture for some time and has been problematised by various
academic disciplines. Therefore, before investigating white trash and film, it is necessary to briefly sketch the ways that white trash has been applied in cultural studies, anthropology and sociology. For example, to whom does the term white trash generally refer? Do those who are dubbed white trash know they are white trash? Or is this term used only by non-white trash in an attempt to differentiate class and race types?

Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray suggest that “white trash is, for whites, the most visible and clearly marked form of whiteness” (Wray & Newitz, 1997a: 4). This useful definition of white trash identifies the way white trash is seen as radically different from those who are just white. When something white is marked, it loses its whiteness. When whiteness is marked it can no longer call itself white—it must acknowledge its off-whiteness, its white trashness. To be both white and marked in this sense is to be dirtied, defiled and decentred. Alternatively, to be white is to occupy a neutral and unmarked position of normativity. Whiteness is an unmarked category because it is both invisible and invincible, or as Richard Dyer writes, it “secures its dominance by seeming to be nothing in particular” (1988: 44). Whereas, to characterise somebody as ‘white trash’ is to acknowledge and mark their shortcomings in terms of race and class. White trash makes whiteness visible. White trash is the ‘film’ on whiteness.

Some of the earliest uses for the term white trash date back to the mid-eighteenth century, when it was used by black slaves to denigrate white servants (Wray and Newitz, 1997a: 2). Furthermore, having emerged in the oppressive context of slavery, the term white trash still evokes issues of class and race struggle when it is used in a contemporary context. In a similar sense, whiteness has been historically associated with an unspoken racial privilege that still exists
today. But if whiteness is historically constructed by a sense of self-importance and privilege, how then do (privileged) white people account for poor whites? Do they not destabilise white power? At successive historical moments various white administrators have tried to explain white poverty by demonstrating the supposed genetic defectiveness of poor whites through eugenics. From 1880 to 1920 the U.S. Eugenics Records Office researched the "Eugenic Family Studies", an exhaustive study that attempted to prove that rural poor whites were born, rather than made. These studies, however, did more to prove that the privileged virtue of whiteness had not been displaced by the existence of poor whites, than they did for the subjects under the probing microscope. The reason being, white trash was never imagined to be anything but innately defective. Moreover, these studies have formed the background to the current cultural stereotype of white trash as degenerate, abject, criminal, primitive, and insane. These stereotypes have contributed to the way white trash has been represented on screen. The link between eugenics and white trash will not be outlined historically in this dissertation, because such histories have been already documented by Nicole H. Rafter (1988) and acknowledged by Wray and Newitz (1997a: 2). Instead, I will demonstrate the way the eugenic theory of white trash has had a hangover effect in representations of white trash in contemporary cinema, using Gummo (Harmony Korine, 1997) to illustrate the tensions produced when defective white trash is represented on screen.

The understandings of white trash prompted by either historical accounts of white slavery or eugenics, suggest that white trash has been an undesirable identity category ever since its inception. In his polemical book The Redneck Manifesto (1997), Jim Goad argues that a double standard exists whenever
someone is labelled ‘white trash’, ‘redneck’ or ‘hillbilly’. He makes this claim by comparing such terms as these to the term ‘nigger’. As we all know by now, ‘nigger’ is a racist term that marks out and separates blacks from whites. It is used as a racist slur to denigrate African Americans, but it also can be used as a self-describing term by black Americans. For example, if a white person refers to a black person as a ‘nigger’ it is taboo, but a black person can refer to him or herself in such terms. According to The Oxford Dictionary of Slang a ‘nigger’ is, “Now mainly derogatory or offensive when used by white people, but neutral or approving in Black English” (Ayto, 1998: 40). Later in this dictionary another definition of ‘nigger’ is cited which is said to have originated during the 1930s, and specifically had to do with film lighting. In this sense, ‘nigger’ was used to describe “a screen used in film-making to mask studio lights or create special lighting effects; from earlier sense, black person” (Ayto, 1998: 345). The association of race with light or the lack thereof is evident in this usage of the term ‘nigger’. As Dyer has argued, “Both the technology of lighting and the specific mode of movie lighting have racial implications” (1997: 84). Dyer is referring to the way that cinema, as a medium of light, privileges white people because an affinity between whiteness and light is often, consciously or not, represented on screen. In Chapter 1, I will return to this discussion of the relationship whiteness shares with light in the films Pleasantville and Safe.

Like the term ‘nigger’, white trash comes to mean different things in different contexts. One of the dominant characterisations of white trash has to do with its regionalised origins in the Southern States of the U.S. According to The Oxford Dictionary of Slang ‘white trash’ is, “Applied to the poor white population of the Southern States of America, and hence, contemptuously, to white people
in general” (Ayto: 1998: 39). Furthermore, a ‘redneck’ is “An uncouth countryman. ‘The hill-billies came from the hills and the rednecks from the swamps’” (378). When we compare these terms we can see how the term ‘nigger’ is not acceptable (unless used by black people), whereas, ‘white trash’ is quite simply “applied” to poor Southern whites. If white trash is indeed used “contemptuously” to describe whites in general, as this definition vaguely surmises, who exactly is being contemptuous? Goad argues that:

Multiculturalism is a country club that excludes white trash. Its refusal to view terms such as ‘white trash’ and ‘redneck’ as race-specific and class-specific lends itself to a mountain of contradictions that would be comical if they weren’t potentially dangerous... [For example] If a white guy handles poisonous snakes to prove his faith in Jesus, he’s a dope. If a black doctor seems embarrassed by scrotum-clutching gangsta rappers and sweaty black preachers, he’s branded a race traitor and a sellout. But if a white lawyer seems ashamed of ball-scratching hillbillies and sweaty white preachers, it’s a perfectly understandable distaste. But if a black guy sacrifices live chickens to appease voodoo gods, it’s respected as a valid cultural expression (22).

Goad obviously uses humour and broadsweeping examples to point out these contradictions, but he does have a point about the way that white trash is perceived in the public imagination. White trash identity is undesirable, an inferior model of respectable whiteness, or comprised, as Goad states, of “cartoon people” (16). This description of white trash as cartoonish is appropriate if we think of the way in which it is often used humorously to dismiss the presence of poor whites. For example, the Coen brothers’ films Raising Arizona (1987) and O Brother, Where Art Thou? include white trash characters who are represented as the “fool”.
In his book *Hillbillyland*, J.W. Williamson uncovers through historical and filmic analysis that the ‘hillbilly’ is almost always represented in U.S. cinema as a fool, lout, and clown, whose behaviour may entertain, but more importantly acts as a mirror that reflects our own identities. He argues, “But when the hillbilly fool gets out of that obvious symbolic cartoon uniform, shaves off the beard, eats a little better, and moves among us, he becomes much more capable, as a mirroring fool, of showing us ourselves” (1995: 44). If white trash is represented in film as a fool, is this not some kind of racist and classist representation and, therefore, worthy of condemnation?

The repeated use of white trash in film, popular culture and elsewhere, acts as a reminder that white people are a racially marked group of people like any other. If a well-to-do white person uses the term white trash to insult a poor white subject, it becomes apparent that racism can exist within the parameters of one’s own race. The differences that separates subjects within that race—class, sexuality, gender—are used as a kind of target practice that differentiates the privileged from the poor within that race. It is because whiteness has held a long history of cultural normativity and privilege that it becomes important to examine and question why this is so.

How does white trash figure in relation to privileged whiteness, and furthermore, why is it so important to critique white trash? White trash is the open secret of whiteness, and it is this visibility and embarrassment of white trash that creates a class polarisation of whites. The current saturation of white trash representations in U.S. cinema and popular culture indicates a growing awareness of the way racial identities are formed by the constituents of class, and that these constituents are not always polarised in terms of black and white, but
increasingly so in terms of white/white trash, black/black trash and so on. Disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies have produced a number of academics, including Richard Dyer, Ruth Frankenberg, Fred Pfeil, and David Roediger, whose individual projects expose the cultural constructions of whiteness.\(^3\)

In 1997, Wray and Newitz edited an anthology of critical essays on white trash, which examined the formations, uses and representations of white trash in critical terms:

Our anthology is intended as an intervention in this field [of whiteness studies], offering a critical understanding of how differences within whiteness—differences marked out by categories like white trash—may serve to undo whiteness as racial supremacy, helping to produce multiple, indeterminate, and anti-racist forms of white identity (1997a: 4).

Wray and Newitz's anthology brings together theories of whiteness with the figure of white trash. Their project is indeed an "intervention" in the field of whiteness studies, evidenced by the inclusion of another essay they co-wrote on white trash, in a collection of essays called *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (1997). This dissertation will also bring together whiteness and white trash because more work must be undertaken to demonstrate the way that once the invisibility of whiteness is exposed, it is inevitably 'trashed'. Privileged whites love to hate white trash because of the fear that their whiteness is just as marked.

The ability to 'explain' white trash in academic terms is largely due to the growing theorisation of whiteness. Prior to this theorisation, whiteness was

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rarely perceived to be a raced entity, let alone a classed one. Indeed, whiteness studies still sometimes neglect to discuss class because whiteness is often assumed to be somehow privileged because of its non-colour. White trash is an important cultural category because it forces on whiteness an examination of the interlinked relationship between class and race. White trash is frequently perceived as a marked, ‘trashed’ form of whiteness, but the language of whiteness studies is not always used to examine white trash. Perhaps, this is because white trash may appear to be more ‘authentic’ if it is examined on its own terms, independent of the constraints of privileged whiteness. Similarly, in many studies on whiteness, white trash does not even figure.

I was made aware of the chasm dividing cultural critiques of whiteness and white trash in 1998 when Richard Dyer visited Sydney to give a public lecture on (privileged) whiteness and film. Afterwards, in the time allocated for questions, I asked him how he would place white trash in relation to his research. Professor Dyer responded by saying that he had noticed the impact of white trash on American culture, adding that the film Mars Attacks (Tim Burton, 1996) was a good example of white trash because of its references to white trash icon Elvis Presley. At the time I wondered whether my question had been answered, because I had seen better examples of white trash films.

Yet whatever the example, a marked form of whiteness can no longer be regarded as white. For if privileged whiteness is constantly under threat by the presence of poor whites, or anything else that may contest its hegemony, then it is forever in the process of attempting to maintain its cultural worth and prestige.

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4 Dyer’s paper “The Colour of White People” was delivered at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney on Monday, 31 August, 1998.
This process suggests that whiteness is increasingly paranoid about losing its privileged title, and will do anything to combat contamination. In doing so, whiteness must acknowledge its presence and encounter its own visibility; whiteness effectively marks itself in the process and proves, unwittingly, that it is also marked. The more whiteness ascertains its worth, the more it calls attention to itself. *Is whiteness, however privileged, always one step away from being white trash?*

**Always Trash**

Because whiteness is always at risk of being trashed, it is never really white; rather, it is always ‘off-white’, *always trash*. Whiteness can never maintain its neutrality, privilege, cleanliness and virtue because the more whiteness tries to maintain itself (something it does a lot), the more visible and marked it becomes. Once marked, whiteness can no longer be regarded as white. Instead, it is off-white, a trashed version of whiteness, it becomes white trash.

Whiteness refers to a rather basic visual entity. Any object which is primarily defined by its ‘whiteness’ is also defined in relation to what it is not. Comprehending ‘trash’ acknowledges the way whiteness could be dulled over time by non-white properties.

This dissertation will primarily refer to whiteness in terms of race and class. Trash always refers to a class category within the racial entity of whiteness. If whiteness does not always see itself as raced, it certainly recognises class hierarchies. To identify the trash within whiteness—the white trash—is to see whiteness as a construct whose very foundation is not as stable as it wants to
believe. Something that has been constructed, by its very character, can also be dismantled. When whiteness points its finger at the ‘white trash’ it is unwittingly destabilising its privilege as white, because in doing so, it becomes visible to itself and others as marked. *And a marked form of whiteness is off-white: white trash.* Whiteness is, in this way, always one step away from being white trash.

**White Trash Cinema**

Using the framework established above, this dissertation will examine the ‘look’ of whiteness and white trash in film and establish a set of conceptual parameters by which White Trash Cinema can be defined. What is White Trash Cinema? Films specifically concerned with presenting critically conceived representations of white trash belong to the new cinematic category of White Trash Cinema. This new cinematic sub-genre refers to films which present complex, fragmented, heterogenous, and multiple ways of understanding white trash identity. White Trash Cinema, therefore, is a cinematic style that acknowledges that white trash is a category constantly called into question and reinvented. White Trash Cinema rethinks the myriad ways in which white identity functions in film. Whiteness is forced to become a fully accountable social and cultural category in White Trash Cinema. The films of White Trash Cinema depict white people who are, for whatever reason, aware of their whiteness. Being aware of whiteness makes white as a category visible and not taken for granted.

The ‘look’ of White Trash Cinema refers to its aesthetic properties. ‘Aesthetics’ is being used here in a general sense, rather than in philosophical,
Hegelian terms. By aesthetics I am referring to the characteristic visual markers utilised by the films chosen for analysis. The 'look' of these films will be examined with careful consideration of the way whites and white trash are characterised, and moreover, the way cinematic narratives often invoke a set of identity politics specific to white identity. Though some of the films I examine are populated with white trash characters, their mode of production may not necessarily fit within a white trash aesthetic. *Lawn Dogs* (John Duigan, 1997), for example, is a film which pits privileged whites against white trash, with the overriding strategy being the valorisation of the underdog—or "lawn dog", so to speak. This film does not, in any way, adopt a trash aesthetic to do this, but is, rather, a stylised, sophisticated independent film. Alternatively, Harmony Korine's *Gummo* employs a white trash aesthetic, though to a different degree. Korine's white trash aesthetic is characterised by an immediacy and spontaneity which appeals to the recurring depictions of white trash as authentic, 'true' and 'real'.

This dissertation begins by looking at the historically constructed category of whiteness. Chapter 1 will introduce the key concepts of race and class that inform my overall examination of White Trash Cinema. To understand white trash, one must understand the workings of whiteness. For this reason, Chapter 1 focuses on privileged whiteness in order to establish some conceptual parameters for thinking through whiteness as a kind of mask that—by virtue of its characterisation as a mask—comes to reveal itself. I will examine the tensions of whiteness as both visible and invisible, especially as they relates to film. The films I present as case studies for this analysis, *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998),
Safe (Todd Haynes, 1995) and American Psycho (Mary Harron, 2000) are not films about white trash. Instead, they are films that produce whiteness through a very privileged upper-middle-class lens. It is this focus on whiteness as privileged, not only as a racial marker, but also as a signifier of privileged class status that will inform the framework of this chapter and, by consequence, the entire dissertation. Privileged whiteness will be discussed before white trash because the case studies of upper-middle-class whiteness provided, come to recognise their whiteness and, in doing so, experience a crisis whereby their whiteness becomes trashed. The trashing of privileged whiteness makes these films fitting examples of an emergent White Trash Cinema because privileged whiteness is never that far removed from white trash in terms of its ability to become marked and unstuck.

Chapter 2 will examine the representations of white trash in Gummo, Lawn Dogs and O Brother, Where Art Thou? The difficult relationship between privileged whiteness and white trash is a recurring theme in White Trash Cinema, and these case studies illustrate the way this class-based relationship is played out along the lines of race, place and sexuality. These films also highlight the manner in which white trash has been commodified in recent U.S. cinema. One of the ways white trash has been commodified is through country music. Country music is white trash music, and this argument has been made to different degrees by Richard Peterson (1997) and Barbara Ching (1997, 2001). Furthermore, white trash filmic cultures often stress the particular relationship country music has to white trash, whether it be through white trash country music narratives (like Nashville and Coal Miner’s Daughter) or through the use of country music on film soundtracks to signify white trashness (as in Postcards
From America). For this reason I analyse the way early forms of U.S. country music are used to represent Southern white trash identity in O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Chapter 3 attempts to problematise white trash in terms of where it may be located in both cultural and geographic contexts. John Waters' films are important, pioneering examples of White Trash Cinema and are widely regarded as being definitive examples of a white trash aesthetic. They are also noted for their flagrantly camp mode of address. How is it that films which employ campness can also maintain a white trash aesthetic? Such a question must be asked because camp is historically linked to urban bourgeois homosexuality, and white trash to suburban/rural poor whites. Primarily using Waters' films, this chapter will examine the way camp and trash often collide in the production of a white trash aesthetic. Camp humour is a definitive feature of White Trash Cinema, and Waters' filmmaking practice has consistently depicted white trash through a framework of camp.

Chapter 4 will examine whiteness and white trashness as it relates to the New Queer Cinema of the early 1990s. Little has been made of the cinematic confluence of queerness with white trashness, despite the fact that the New Queer Cinema abounds with images of white trash. Using My Own Private Idaho (Gus Van Sant, 1991), Postcards From America (Steve McLean, 1994), Boys Don't Cry (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) and Hedwig and the Angry Inch (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001), this chapter will discuss the way New Queer Cinema represents white trash drifters and hustlers who use the road to move across and through the limitless landscape. According to B. Ruby Rich, New Queer Cinema refers to the “flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities,
annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image” (1993: 164). White Trash Cinema also renegotiates subjectivity; specifically through a nexus of race and class. New Queer Cinema was acclaimed during the 1990s for the way it gave queer subjectivity a voice of its own. More to the point, New Queer Cinema recognised that queerness is characterised by a multiplicity of conflicting voices. Similarly, White Trash Cinema gives white trash agency, acknowledging how white trash identity can in fact be a rather queer thing.

The metaphor of the road is very important to the formation of white trash in various films from the New Queer Cinema. One of the reasons for this is that contemporary U.S. road movies are littered with white trash characters. While the metaphor of the road is specifically examined in a queer white trash context in Chapter 4, the road is a productive way of imagining the entire project of this dissertation. Not all of the films examined in this dissertation are about roads, but they take us on an expansive journey that crosses a vast geographic spread including such U.S. cities as Xenia, Louisville, Baltimore, Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles and New York City.

For this reason, the act of bringing together a diverse group of filmic case studies about white trash and whiteness is akin to a road trip across the U.S. landscape because white trash is rarely anchored to one particular location. I have likened this dissertation to a road trip to reinforce the ways in which this project never attempts to provide a linear historical analysis of the development of white trash. Instead, this dissertation will engage with various themes that emerge in White Trash Cinema—themes that are often specific to the geographic or cultural landscapes represented on screen.
In some instances, as in *My Own Private Idaho*, the open road is personified as a character all of its own. Mike (River Phoenix) says early in this film: “There’s not another road anywhere that looks like this road; I mean exactly like this road. It’s one kind of place, one of a kind—like someone’s face, like a fucked-up face”. Similarly, white trash also functions at times as familiar and unique, while in other contexts it is all the more terrifying and “fucked-up”. Whatever the case, the cinematic case studies of white trash presented in this dissertation may depict white trash as “one of a kind”, but rarely specific to “one kind of place”.
CHAPTER 1

THE MASKS OF PRIVILEGED WHITENESS

The white man is sealed in his whiteness.
The black man in his blackness.
— Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (1967).

In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon analyses the psychic and social processes that lead black people to internalise an inferior self image. The title of his landmark study refers to black skin as a signifier of cultural worth—or perceived non-worth, as the case may be—and the way in which whiteness can be attained if a black subject learns the language of whiteness. To learn the language of whiteness, its appetites and discontents, a black person must appropriate a white position, adopt a mask of privileged whiteness, because as Fanon writes, “it is from within that the Negro will seek admittance to the white sanctuary” (1967: 51). It is in the very nuances of Fanon’s own language that we can begin to piece together the shards of porcelain that make up the masks of privileged whiteness. If the subject is “sealed” by the colour of their skin, surely whiteness is a kind of mask or envelope that binds its contents. The body’s surface and all its racial markings are, in Fanon’s schema, the limitations of identity, because identity is primarily formed, not by the body, but by the mind.

Racial identity, for Fanon, is paradoxical. Race is marked by the visibility of the flesh, but as an internalised entity, it has not yet seen the light of day. If whiteness is an internalised “sanctuary” that can only be accessed “from within”,
whiteness becomes an invisible entity because of its perceived cultural privilege. As a “sanctuary”, whiteness takes on a set of spiritual or otherworldly connotations. Whiteness is a place of rest, a place where the light supposedly shines brighter. In this schema, a black subject can only approximate the norms that constitute whiteness. If one wishes to approximate whiteness, he or she must first understand that the act of claiming whiteness entails a belief in the following declaration: “I am white: that is to say that I possess beauty and virtue, which have never been black. I am the color of daylight…” (Fanon, 45).

Whiteness has held a privileged position because it connotes beauty, virtue and light. Blackness has often been associated with the dark side of life, or as cultural critic Ruth Frankenberg states, “crime is ‘black’” (1997: 7). Frankenberg is referring to the way crime has held a history in representation of being associated with the menace of darkness or evil. Specifically, the racial signifier of blackness has often been represented as a suspect identity and is, therefore, more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. Of course, whiteness has been linked to criminal behaviour, especially in the way whiteness has enforced itself as supreme and dominant at the expense of so-called inferior races. Historical scenarios where privileged whiteness has exerted such accepted criminal behaviour include the practices of the Ku Klux Klan. In film, whiteness has been linked to criminal behaviour, but criminality seems to belong more to the realm of white trash—whiteness made visible by lower class affiliation—something I will discuss in later chapters. White criminality perpetuated in a non-white trash context will be examined later in this chapter in relation to the film American Psycho.
Such stereotypes that relate race to a series of connotations are often played out in film. Cinema itself is a medium that has a special affinity with whiteness. The palette of cinema is arguably white, because, as a medium of light, the projected image illuminates white imagery with greater clarity than it does pictures which emphasise darker tonalities. The importance that (white) light plays in the construction of celluloid imagery has produced a tightly knit relationship between light and whiteness, because light illuminates the white body in a much different way than it does the black body.

It is the constructed character of the white body, and particularly the white face in cinema that will be of chief importance in this chapter. I will argue that racial whiteness is a mask—a fantasy position—that illuminates the subject, but simultaneously renders them invisible because “whiteness can be difficult to see” (Aanerud, 1997: 37). Whiteness is invisible because it is perceived as the unmarked norm by which otherness is constituted and thus marked. Like a drawing outlined in invisible ink, whiteness only reveals itself when its surface is scrutinised under specific conditions. The contradiction here is that whiteness is invisible because it is unmarked, while it is simultaneously rendered visible by its mask-like qualities.

Though the project of this dissertation is to primarily examine cinematic representations of white trash—or ‘trashed’ whiteness—this chapter will focus on the formations of white racial identities and relatively privileged class categorisations. The reason for this is that much of my discussion is concerned with the tensions produced when whiteness becomes visible and marked. This chapter will examine whiteness as an opaque mask of self-worth that calls attention to itself while also attempting to be positioned as substanceless.
Whiteness, in other words, is an unmarked surface that is marked as it begins to gain self-recognition as a raced entity. The films analysed hereafter contain characters whose whiteness is like a mask that reveals as much as it conceals.

In the first of my case studies, *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998), whiteness is established initially as the invisible norm. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that whiteness is imprinted, mask-like, and easily destabilised when ‘coloured’ hues begin to complicate the established community formations of black and whiteness. *Pleasantville* explores the limits of whiteness through a narrative of virtue and innocence that slowly transforms into something else. Through the course of the film, sexual awakening and self-discovery attenuate the initial importance placed on virtue and innocence.

The flipside of whiteness as a signifier of virtue is whiteness as disease and death. In the second case study, *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), whiteness is a signifier for death and disease, though not in a way we might expect. The lead character Carol White (Julianne Moore) develops an allergic reaction to her environment, and as her condition worsens, her face (and body) is bleached of its natural properties. What makes *Safe* an interesting case study of whiteness is that Carol’s condition suggests that whiteness is a diseased entity that is inevitably rendered visible. *Safe* presents the supposedly comfortable world (of privileged whiteness) as an un-safe place: meaning, “there are no safe social spaces, no safe health-care practices, no safe critical perspectives, and, lest we forget, no safe cinema” (Reid, 1998: 42).

My last case study will be an analysis of Mary Harron’s film *American Psycho* (2000). In *American Psycho* whiteness and death are indeed linked, though it is not simply because its anti-hero Patrick Bateman is a white serial killer that
his whiteness is linked to death. Rather I am interested in the way that Bateman’s class status, along with his race, gender and heterosexuality inevitably position him as average, despite his extreme attempts to resist such a fate. Straight white masculinity is the focus in my reading of American Psycho because I wish to extend Carol Clover’s concept of the “average white male” by arguing that one does not necessarily need to be poor or working class to be average; rather, being part of a privileged class grouping can ensure averageness, and by extension, paranoia, self-loathing and madness. Bateman is trapped in an ongoing cycle of keeping up with the break-neck speed of consumerism. His desire to possess that which is harder, better, faster and stronger than everyone else perpetuates an identity that can never be unique. Instead, Bateman exists in a constant state of being average — despite his attempts to be noticed.

All three films represent white identities that are very much defined by their upper-middle-class positioning. But this is not the only rationale for choosing these particular films to analyse whiteness. They have been selected because the three films offer a representational spread which allows one to think through the way whiteness is represented in relation to time, or specifically the 1950s versus the 1990s (Pleasantville); the way whiteness is represented in relation to women and disease (Safe); and the way whiteness is represented in relation to men and averageness (American Psycho).

Privileged whiteness will form the focus of this chapter, because whiteness is primarily a fantasy position. Feminist theorist Diana Fuss argues that “‘white’ defines itself through a powerful and illusory fantasy of escaping the exclusionary practices of psychical identity formation” (1995: 146). Fuss is referring to the ways in which whiteness comes to be a privileged signifier in a
binary schema; the opposite of white is not black, rather it is not-white. In other words, whiteness takes itself for granted and comes to be defined, not as a racial grouping, but as a generic signifier for 'human'. Whiteness may attempt to remain an invisible and generic signifier, but it is only because whiteness is constantly attempting to negotiate and reinforce its own self-worth that it calls attention to itself as a paranoid identity, forever approximating its own set of values.

**White and Black in Colour: Pleasantville**

*Pleasantville* constructs otherness, not by representing whiteness against black or non-white ethnic groups, but by placing whiteness against itself. To be specific, whiteness is placed alongside a 'coloured' model of whiteness. Meaning, identity in *Pleasantville* is represented through the televisual as either a black and white or colour medium. Racial politics are only implied in *Pleasantville*, because it is largely concerned with the differences generated between those who exist in black and white and those who have been transformed (or 'upgraded') to colour. In her book *Yearning*, cultural critic bell hooks analyses *Wings of Desire* (Wim Wenders, 1988) as a film that uncritically reinforces whiteness because the scattered inclusion of black angels serves no real narrative purpose except to emphasise the whiteness of the other angels (1990: 166). Interestingly, hooks makes no mention of the fact that *Wings of Desire* is, for the most part, a black and white film; the point of view of the angels is filmed in black and white, and it is only when they trade their heavenly bodies for human existence that they
experience a world of colour. This may be just a narrative ploy to illustrate the
difference of the angels, but surely it serves to further illustrate the perhaps
unconscious inclusion of racial imagery, described by hooks.

Pleasantville is also filmed in black and white, and it too addresses racial
themes. In Pleasantville, whiteness is the only identity—even if it is ‘coloured’—
which effectively illustrates the fact that American 1950’s middle-class
subjectivity was defined by the exclusion of the ‘other’. To access this subjectivity
was to exclude everything that did not fall under its spell: blackness and
homosexuality, for example, did not cohere with the dominant set of white
heterosexual family values. Pleasantville is a film about whiteness not because it is
represented alongside racial otherness, but because it represents the way
whiteness can be divided when its value system is fractured and redefined.

“Pleasantville”¹ is the name attributed to the (fictional) 1950’s black and
white sitcom central to the film’s narrative. Like “Leave it to Beaver” or even
“The Brady Bunch”, the sitcom “Pleasantville” reinforces a ‘wholesome’ model
of white middle-class family values. Aside from its blatant references to sitcoms,
Pleasantville makes visual reference to the aesthetics of U.S. propaganda films
made during the Eisenhower period.² In particular, the scenes that concern the
school students utilise a propaganda aesthetic. Gary Ross states: “I wanted it to
look like a propaganda film from the Eisenhower administration. We bathed [the
students] with sunlight coming through those windows” (Director Commentary,

¹ For the purposes of this dissertation, all television examples cited appear in quotation
marks to maintain the distinction between cinema and television. For example, when
Pleasantville appears in italics, I am discussing the film. When “Pleasantville” appears in
quotation marks, I am referring to the sitcom within the film. When Pleasantville does
not appear in italics or quotation marks, I am referring to the name of the township.
² Dwight David Eisenhower was President of the U.S. during 1953-61, and served as
Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in the World War II invasion of Europe.
Pleasantville DVD, Roadshow, 1997). Ross is discussing the classroom scene where the students are enthusiastically absorbing their teacher's lesson; their whiteness illuminated by sunlight. The link between whiteness and light is explicit here, underscoring the way propaganda often framed whiteness as light. In the preceding scene, illustrated in Figure 1.1, the propaganda aesthetic is again evident because the camera frames this same group of students marching off to school, the U.S. flag hoisted high above their heads.

![Figure 1.1](image)

The low angle of this image assists in emphasising the U.S. flag, creating a visual reference to propaganda films of the Eisenhower period.

The protagonist of the film, David (Tobey Maguire) is obsessed with the sitcom "Pleasantville", watching endless repeats of the program and even discussing it at school with a friend. David seems obsessed with its home-spun charm and nostalgia, and because it represents an ideal model of family values, the kind that does not exist in his broken family. In "Pleasantville" life is sweet: everyone is white, middle-class, and gender roles conform to the "heterosexual
matrix".³ David watches this program because he yearns for the same kind of
'sweetness'; "Pleasantville" represents an escape from his own late-twentieth
century universe where life is unstable and scarred by the breakdown of the
family, and the less immediate effects of media images of disease, famine and
war. David's twin sister, Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) represents everything that
David is not: she is sexually assertive, rebellious, strives for popularity, watches
"MTV" and resents her brother's 'uncool' ways. Early in the film, David and
Jennifer fight for the remote control until they end up breaking it. By freakish
coincidence a television repairman (Don Knotts)⁴ knocks on their door and offers
them a new remote control, one that will "put you right in the picture". Once the
repairman has left, David and Jennifer resume their fight over the remote control
until they are magically transported into the fictional township of Pleasantville
and transformed into two of its pivotal characters: Bud and Mary Sue.⁵
David/Bud believes that they should attempt to blend into their new situation,
because if they destabilise the already established community formations of
Pleasantville, they may never make it back home.

³ In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler defines the heterosexual matrix as "that grid of
cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized... [This
grid] assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex
expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses
female) that is oppositely hierarchical and hierarchically defined through the compulsory
practice of heterosexuality" (1990: 151).
⁴ Between 1960-1965 Don Knotts starred in "The Andy Griffith Show", a sitcom set in
Mayberry, North Carolina. Knotts played Andy's cousin Deputy Barney Fife, a complete
fool who considered himself a competent law enforcer. Like "Pleasantville", "The Andy
Griffith Show" was a representation of small-town wholesomeness, littered by a cast of
eccentric white characters.
⁵ Pleasantville's fantasy of being transported into the narrative action of a television
show has been appropriated by two popular U.S. television programs. In an episode of
"The Simpsons" (1998), Bart and Lisa fight over the remote control and become trapped
in their favourite cartoon "Itchy and Scratchy". Less directly, an episode of "Charmed"
(2001) references Pleasantville when Phoebe (Alyssa Milano) becomes a perfect 1950's
housewife upon wearing a cursed engagement ring. Phoebe's transformation is initially
signified by a temporary change from colour to black and white.
Pleasantville represents whiteness as an invisible norm that is imprinted mask-like. Whiteness functions in Pleasantville as a racial signifier, but more importantly, whiteness refers to an aesthetic property. “Pleasantville” is in black and white because it is a program that precedes the invention of colour television. In literal terms, the residents of Pleasantville do not understand colour because they have been created in black and white. Metaphorically speaking, colour does not exist because it symbolises knowledge. In one instance, the limitation of knowledge is represented by the way the books in the public library contain blank pages. If something is ‘coloured in’, we come to think of that object as being filled in, shaded, fully formed, ‘realistic’. Long before colour is introduced to the township, we can assume that these characters are exaggerated, utopian, idealistic and two-dimensional.6

Pleasantville explores the limits of whiteness through a narrative of innocence and virtue that is gradually disrupted. Like the two films discussed later in this chapter Safe and American Psycho, Pleasantville is an interesting case study of the way whiteness is constructed as a fantasy position, a masquerade of sorts. Pleasantville is important to this chapter because it is pure fantasy, and revels in the spectacle of make-believe, time travel and the investments or obsessions often attributed to televised popular culture. Though Pleasantville represents whiteness as fantasy and masquerade, the film itself is a glossy narrative that on closer inspection reveals a much darker subtext about the hegemony that middle class white identity exerts over what it regards as the

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6 Pleasantville was actually filmed on colour stock and digitally transformed into black and white, because according to the director, shooting on black and white stock can potentially flatten its subject, and make it appear two-dimensional (Director’s Commentary, Pleasantville, DVD edition, Roadshow, 1997).
‘other’. Furthermore, this hegemony is called into question as the film progresses and the narrative uses the split between the aesthetics of colour/black and white as a metaphor for race.

Three different but linked narratives operate in *Pleasantville*: the first is the way David and Jennifer transform the community; the second has to do with their mother Betty (Joan Allen) whose sexual awakening is made visible when her face transforms into colour, and the way she attempts to mask this transformation. The third narrative concerns the patriarch of the family, George (William H. Macy) whose whiteness is obscured through shadow the more he attempts to resist change. All three narratives are propelled by the discovery of knowledge and (heterosexual) sex.

These narratives are also marked by location, meaning a hierarchy is established where different locations come to mean different things for each of the characters. The teenagers mostly congregate at school, the soda shop, the public library and Lover’s Lane. Women are mostly positioned in the home as nurturers and housewives, while the men socialise at the bowling alley or rally for “togetherness” at the Town Hall (we rarely see them at work). By situating the teenagers, women and men within these separate contexts, *Pleasantville* authentically reinforces the rigid heterosexist gender roles that are paradigmatic of life in the 1950s, as represented in American popular culture.

*Pleasantville* is a narrative spun around Biblical references. It comes as no surprise that these rigid and heterosexist gender roles should be of primary concern as these kinds of identity formations are enforced by Judeo-Christianity. Jennifer and David’s new-found presence in Pleasantville sets off a chain of events whereby these ideological formations become unstuck. The parallel that
can be drawn between the narrative of *Pleasantville* and the Garden of Eden (found in Genesis of the Old Testament) suggests that the film appropriates Biblical values in an attempt to address the limitations of such a framework. Furthermore, the appropriation of normative moral values in a film that celebrates fantasy emphasises the way that these values are perhaps utopian and unreal. In the 1950s, American family values were reinforced (however unconsciously) through a Christian framework which perceived sex as limited to the union between a married couple. It is possible to assume, based on this framework, that marriage served a particular reproductive function. A sitcom such as “The Brady Bunch”, for example, occasionally alluded to sex, but only through a barely visible subtext. Despite the heterosexual union represented by Greg and Carol of “The Brady Bunch”, sex played little part because the Brady family was made up of children from their previous marriages—reproduction had already taken place elsewhere.

The township of Pleasantville is a fantasy location inhabited by people who are not necessarily a part of the sitcom to which this place refers. The film never reveals its artifice as a studio set. Rather, Pleasantville is a place where life appears exactly as it would in a 1950’s sitcom. It is because Pleasantville is a fictitious landscape and a mirror of 1950’s sitcom culture that its residents do not understand or know of sex. The residents of Pleasantville exist in a state where their identity and role in society has been already fashioned. In *Pleasantville*, the family is central to the narrative and it has already been created, prescribed as one of the key conditions of their existence. The origins and mechanics of the

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7 Hebrews 13:4 claims that immorality, adultery (that which is not confined to a marital union) should be kept free from the “marriage bed”. It is implied that sex is limited to marriage, because it serves a particular reproductive function.
family do not exist because their life begins already as a family. In other words, sexual reproduction serves no purpose because life was created by an unseen author—the family always already exists. Pleasantville, therefore, sets itself up as a narrative that more than anything alludes to the Biblical notion of creation. Like Adam and Eve who had been created and ruled over by God, the residents of Pleasantville adhere to the same kind of free-floating laws, meaning, they unconsciously conform to the instincts by which they were modelled. In Pleasantville, knowledge has been provided by an unseen force until their fall from grace results in their world being ‘coloured in’. An autonomous sense of identity does not exist in Pleasantville because they are fictitious characters; they exist only in a context akin to the representational, simulated land of television. For example, when Jennifer decides to seduce Skip (Paul Walker), one of the All-American Pleasantville jocks, her brother David is mortified exclaiming: “He doesn’t exist, you can’t do that to someone who doesn’t exist”.

In Pleasantville everything is black and white. The main reason for this is that the sitcom of which its name derives is set in the late 1950s when television was a black and white medium. “Nothing is as simple as Black and White” boasts the tagline for Pleasantville.8 This is an ironic tagline because as the film’s narrative progresses, this is not necessarily the case. The use of black and white comes to suggest that knowledge is defined through a rigid binary system where things fit into a system of difference; there is no in-between, except for varied shades of grey. Knowledge, therefore, is limited because it does not know resistance; it knows nothing outside of its direct frame of reference. The

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8 This is the tagline used to promote Pleasantville by the Australian division of Roadshow distribution. The U.S. tagline for the film is, “Pleasantville - It’s Just Around the Corner”.

community that makes up Pleasantville are exclusively white in terms of racial identity. Blackness does not exist as a racial marker. Blackness is merely an outline that shades and defines the contours of these characters; holding their whiteness in check. Like a colouring book, the black outline refers to the spatial limits of the character, and furthermore, separates objects from one another so that when one comes to colour them in, a distinction is already made between places, people and things.

Before they were magically transported to Pleasantville, David and Jennifer lived in colour. Their world was saturated by colour, difference and knowledge. The establishing scenes of *Pleasantville* set up a comparative relationship between the two distinct worlds by emphasising the ethnic and racial diversity of their school environment. The social issues they learn about in school or through the media (like AIDS, famine and unemployment), also suggest that knowledge is widely accessible. In one early scene, Jennifer gets ready for a date and in extreme close up (as if the screen is a mirror) she applies copious amounts of make-up. This is a world of colour, their skin is marked by colour even if they are white. When Jennifer finds herself in Pleasantville she complains: “Look at me, I’m pasty”, and “We’re supposed to be in color”. Even though Jennifer and David are racially white, their new found whiteness in Pleasantville is exaggerated and unreal.

A red rose is the first object to be transformed from black and white into colour. Skip notices the rose not long after his first ever sexual encounter. It is interesting to note that a rose in bloom should be the first object to turn colour. Not only does it come to symbolise the changes that are about to take place in the community; arguably the rose also alludes to female genitalia, something that is
probably being acknowledged for the first time in Pleasantville. Another film which came out a year after *Pleasantville*, *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), also uses a type of red rose called the “American Beauty” as symbolic of innocence and femininity in ‘bloom’, but in this instance it attends a framework of male fantasy.

Long after Skip notices the rose in bloom, a tree bearing a shiny red apple is discovered by Bud’s girlfriend Margaret (Marley Shelton) in Lover’s Lane. It is at this point that Lover’s Lane most explicitly mirrors the Garden of Eden, because like Eve, Margaret spies the fruit and offers it to Bud. There is no evidence to suggest that Margaret is tempting Bud with forbidden fruit, which as the Biblical story would have it, is the fruit from “the tree of knowledge of good and evil”. Rather, it is when the TV repairman reappears to Bud (through the TV screen) and comments on the atrocities taking place in Pleasantville that we see a replay of Bud eating the apple. The TV repairman could arguably be the voice of a higher authority, a free-floating, magical or God-like character who charges Bud with his transgressions not yet committed. Though the apple was obviously linked to the sensual pleasures of Lover’s Lane, the repairman attempts to invest it with knowledge and guilt, suggesting that while it may be shiny on the surface, it is ultimately “rotten to the core”. Unlike Adam and Eve,

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9 In art history, a number of women artists such as Judy Chicago and Vivienne Binns have represented vaginal imagery through flowers and circular forms. Dubbed "central core imagery", this style was particularly celebrated in the 1970s, even though earlier artists like Georgia O’Keefe painted similar forms and have, therefore, been linked to this tradition of feminist artmaking.

10 See Genesis 2:16.

11 In a review of *American Beauty*, Paul Byrnes remarks that it has much in common with a number of films including *Pleasantville*, because as he argues, “it’s noticeable how full of self-hated American cinema has become... What *American Beauty* says about America—that the country is rotten to the core—has been said a lot lately, in a whole slew of films last year, from *Pleasantville* to *Election* to *Happiness...*” (2000: 12). Despite
however, Bud is not ashamed of his actions; instead he ignores the repairman by switching off the TV.

While colour begins to transform the black and whiteness of the town in these scenes, it is also symbolic of knowledge and identity. Long before colour is fully acknowledged as a racial marker of identity, it is signified by the film’s soundtrack. Towards the end of the film, just after various objects and people have transformed into colour, the teenagers become aware of rock and roll music. Gene Vincent’s “Be-Bop-A-Lula” and Buddy Holly’s “Rave On” are just two of the recognisable rock and roll songs used in these scenes. A division had developed between ‘coloured’ people and those in black and white, an ironic reference to the way racial separatism was reinforced in the 1950s between white and black America. This separatism incites intolerance and conflict between the two camps in Pleasantville, leading not necessarily to race riots, but perhaps to ‘colour riots’. Surely, race is not the issue here because sameness dominates in terms of racial identity. The theme song of the film, “Across the Universe” sung by a contemporary artist, Fiona Apple (but originally performed by The Beatles), suggests a longing for sameness—even a longing for stasis—echoed by the lyric “nothing’s gonna change my world”.

Everyone in Pleasantville (except of course, Bud and Mary Sue) originally function in a framework of sameness, especially with regard to their racial whiteness; it is colour that institutes difference. Interestingly, one of the teenagers who taunts Bud for having a ‘coloured’ girlfriend is called Whitey. Towards the film’s conclusion, the ‘coloured’ people seek refuge in the soda

Byrnes’ generalisations about the state of U.S. national identity in film, he does highlight a trend toward self-critique and self-parody in recent mainstream American films.
shop, and despite the fact that rock music had been outlawed, they dance to Buddy Holly’s song. What is significant about the soundtrack is that rock and roll music, particularly Holly’s music, was often described as ‘coloured’ music when it first emerged in the 1950s. The rhythmic affinities that rock music shared with soul, funk and Motown brought with it a sense that it was black music. In White, Richard Dyer shares an anecdote where his own sense of whiteness became apparent through music and dancing:

At one mixed-race social event [in 1980], we all started dancing in a formation copied from the TV series Soul Train... For all my love of dancing and funk, I have never felt more white than when I danced between those lines. I know it was stereotypes in my head; I know plenty of black people who can’t dance; I know perceptions of looseness and tightness of the body are dubious. All I can say is that at that moment, the black guys all looked loose and I felt tight (1997: 6).

Dyer’s anecdote illustrates one of the first times his whiteness had become obvious to him. Dyer’s whiteness at this particular moment is marked by tightness, self-consciousness and paranoia. In Pleasantville, the use of rock music effectively references the way that it was embraced by white performers (like Holly) despite criticisms that such music was ‘coloured’.

Whiteness is unmarked and never called into question in Pleasantville. This is largely because racial difference does not exist. The community perceives life as a black and white tableaux, and when their whiteness is illuminated by the introduction of colour (on both literal and symbolic levels, as in the use of music to symbolise the ‘colouring in’ of whiteness), it remains largely unacceptable. Their whiteness is called into question, not by the existence of other racial types,
but by the contamination of whiteness by colour. To be simultaneously white and ‘coloured’ is to be recognised as having literally and symbolically eaten the apple of knowledge, and participated in the newly discovered world of heterosexuality.

Having outlined the way David and Jennifer assist in transforming Pleasantville into a ‘coloured’ community, I will now shift direction and discuss the way their mother, Betty, experiences a sexual awakening that is made visible when her face becomes ‘coloured’. Betty’s character is important to this discussion because she is the most obvious example of the way whiteness is regarded as a mask. Betty experiences sexual pleasure for the first time, after masturbation is explained by Mary Sue. The intensity of Betty’s sexual awakening causes a tree to catch fire—the first time Pleasantville has ever encountered a fire.\(^{12}\) The day after Betty’s self-discovery she notices, to her shame, that she is now ‘coloured’.

Betty’s mask is a literal one. When she realises that she is ‘coloured’ she reverts to black and white, after David suggests she use make-up (see Figure 1.2). To pass as a respected Pleasantville citizen she uses make-up to conceal her Technicolor appearance. The use of cosmetics suggests that Betty’s whiteness is pure masquerade, in much the same way the act of applying cosmetics suggests femininity as masquerade.\(^{13}\) Is it possible to think of racial identity as

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\(^{12}\) This is another Biblical reference. In Exodus Chapter 3, Moses encounters a burning bush in the desert, which reveals itself as the voice of God.

\(^{13}\) In her 1929 essay “Womanliness as Masquerade”, psychoanalyst Joan Riviere argues that femininity “could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (Reprinted in Donald, 1986: 38). In Pleasantville, Betty’s cosmetic transformation is her masquerade of womanliness. By concealing the sexualised implications of her newly ‘coloured’ skin, Betty averts the reprisals expected of the situation. Interestingly for women, the
masquerade? Betty’s transformation from black and white to colour does not suggest that she has changed racial identity, it is only the ironic references made to ‘coloured’ people throughout the film that sustains a discussion of its racial politics. The fact that Pleasantville is entirely made up of white people—even if they are ‘coloured’—is problematic when we consider the actual lived experience of African Americans, because sameness between white people is represented, rather than racial difference between white and black America.

If Betty’s face can be adjusted to avert being exposed, then her ‘coloured’ face functions like a mask. Betty engages in a masquerade because if she was not to do so, her difference would be revealed to her husband George. If George was to know of her new appearance, he would know she has acquired forbidden knowledge and engaged in something unfamiliar to their universe. Betty realises she could come under attack for her new ‘coloured’ face. This fear is realised

heightening of beauty and sexuality (“freshening up” and “putting on my face”) is perhaps the most popularised use for make-up. Betty uses make-up for contrary reasons.
when a group of white males harass her — the leader of this gang is by no coincidence named Whitey.

When Betty finally reveals her ‘coloured’ appearance to George (Figure 1.3) he expresses no sympathy, reacting as if she should immediately conceal the unwanted hues. George is more concerned with his own reputation, and the normative set of values to which he is accustomed. The dialogue from this scene effectively illustrates the struggle between the two as George simultaneously attempts to dismiss and possess her. Betty resists George’s demands because her identity as a ‘coloured’ person has been reconciled:

BETTY: Look at me George, look at my face. That meeting’s not for me.
GEORGE: You’ll put some make-up on.
BETTY: I don’t want to put on some make-up.
GEORGE: It goes away. It’ll go away!
BETTY: I don’t want it to go away.
GEORGE: Now you listen to me. You’re coming to this meeting; you’re going to put on some make-up; you’re going to be home at six o’clock every night and you are going to have dinner ready on this table.
BETTY: No, I’m not sweetie.

The primary struggle here relates to gender and George’s normative expectations. Pleasantville only refers to racial themes as a symbolic backdrop to the dichotomy that is established between colour/black and white. Even though Betty’s white face is transformed by the properties of colour, her racial identity is obviously still white, despite her use of make-up. As I stated earlier, David and Jennifer are white, but unlike the citizens of Pleasantville, their lives have always
been characterised and informed by the racial and aesthetic connotations of colour.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 1.3**
Betty refuses to adhere to George's expectations.

*Pleasantville* suggests that whiteness is a masquerade because it has the potential to conceal a hidden reservoir of untapped knowledge. *Pleasantville* is a narrative about whites masquerading in white face, because they perform the normative codes of whiteness without ever realising it. When they experience another version of whiteness, it is still white, but enhanced by colour and therefore, knowledge. Colour may signify knowledge in the film’s narrative, however, the knowledge that they have gained is that they can now look within themselves; they have now been equipped with the ideological tools needed to embrace difference within their neatly ordered, privileged universe. Ironically, the assumption here is that once colour is the norm in this microcosmic world, sameness will reign as it did before.
George’s masculinity and effectiveness as a father and husband are downplayed to suggest that he is two-dimensional and marked by a sense of non-identity. George resists the ‘coloured’ transformations occurring in the community, as do most of the other men with whom he unites. The conservative traditions that are slowly being overturned are for the most part, embraced by the teenagers and women of Pleasantville. For the men, however, these changes destabilise their perceived authority as men. Their authority is assumed because, as ‘breadwinners’, the men are imbued with an unspoken privilege. Interestingly, the narrative does not state what the majority of these men do for work. Apart from the mayor, the barber and the firemen (whose job description initially consisted of rescuing cats from trees), most of the men have jobs that bear little importance to the narrative, let alone their identities as men. The only man whose job brings about any sense of identity is Mr Johnson (Jeff Daniels), who manages the soda shop. Arguably, he is feminised because his work consists of working with food. As a budding artist, Mr Johnson is in touch with his emotions and the changes occurring in Pleasantville, and it is this sensitivity that further feminises him. Perhaps it is these characteristics that attract Betty, because she pursues Mr Johnson upon finding herself ‘coloured’.

For Mr Johnson, a world of colour is liberating as it enhances his interest in art. For all the other men, life must go on in black and white because ‘colour’ poses a threat to their normative set of values as much as it does their idea of aesthetics. In one scene, George returns home after a day at work, and for the first time ever, his family are uncharacteristically absent. Rain and lightning is occurring for the first time in Pleasantville, rendering the shots of the domestic interiors as dark and slightly menacing. George wanders around the house at a
loss for words, only able to repeat the phrase, “where’s my dinner?” The absence of his family at this time is equated with neglect, disrupted routine, and the fear that he may never eat dinner again. It is at this point in the narrative that George’s identity is starting to notice the effects of change. Unsurprisingly, the emphasis on darkness and shadow visually suggests a sinister presence in Pleasantville, which is emphasised by the shadows cast on George’s face. Figure 1.4 illustrates this use of lightning and shadow in this scene.

Not knowing where to go, George takes refuge at the local bowling alley where his male friends have congregated. He tells them of having been home, only to find “no wife, no lights, no dinner”. The town’s mayor Big Bob (J.T. Walsh) consoles George and says, “You’re with us now. We’re safe now, thank goodness we are in a bowling alley... It’s a question of values... Are we in this alone, or are in this thing together?” They all chant for togetherness, separating themselves from the ‘coloured’ community. A rainbow appears the next day emphasising the split between Pleasantville’s two very conflicting contrasts: black and white versus colour.¹⁴ The rainbow reference implies that colour and redemption go hand in hand, something that is not grasped by George and his male, black and white friends.

The values of Pleasantville, enforced by masculine authority, are a call for things to remain “pleasant” and “true”. A set of guidelines for community behaviour, entitled the “Laws of Conduct and Code of Common Decency” are

¹⁴ This is another Biblical reference. In Genesis 9:13 God states to Noah, “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth”. The divine covenant signified by the rainbow was a promise that God would never again flood the earth as a form of punishment.
Arriving home to a dark, vacant house, George panics. The scene is dramatically lit by the lightning from the outside thunderstorm.

implemented to outlaw the introduction of colour, and defend the clear-cut contrast of black and whiteness. Big Bob states in the Chamber of Commerce, “Recently, certain things around here have become unpleasant. It seems to me that the first thing we have to do is to separate out the things that are pleasant from the things that are unpleasant”. To make this distinction between pleasant/unpleasant, Big Bob and the male authority figures of Pleasantville must defend themselves against the spectacle of colour. To remain white, and without colour, a defence must be instituted against the spectacle of colour. The crisis implied by the newly ‘coloured’ people in Pleasantville is that their disruptive presence could quite easily become the norm.

To celebrate their neutral existence, their black and whiteness, the men of Pleasantville equate that very whiteness with pleasantness. The surface of their neutrally coded bodies validates their normativity. Referring to the ‘coloured’ changes in Pleasantville, Big Bob argues in one scene that “This isn’t some virus that will clear up on its own”. Even though it seems remarkable that he
understands what a virus actually is—there is not evidence, up to this point that people get sick in Pleasantville—this line of dialogue suggests that the recent transformations to the community take place on the sheer surface of things, unlike the invisible strains of a virus that attacks the interiority of the body. Later on in the Chamber of Commerce, Bud argues against Big Bob when he states, “See those faces up there; they’re no different than you are, they just happen to see something inside themselves. It’s in you and you can’t stop what’s in you”. Bud’s argument echoes the idea that the ‘coloured’ changes in Pleasantville are not unlike that of a virus. It changes the body, alters its very conditions from the inside out.

The men wear identity like a mask, an attempt to defend both their masculinity and whiteness. The men of Pleasantville, particularly George, adopt a mask of masculinity and whiteness as an attempt to avoid looking within themselves. It is only when they are forced to acknowledge their suppressed emotions or feelings that they too transform into ‘coloured’ people. The logic of masculinity or maleness is that it has been philosophically bound to the mind and reason, whereas the body and emotion has been linked to femininity and femaleness.\(^{15}\) Similarly, if gender codes operate in this conventional way, then whiteness also signifies normativity, because as an ideal it can only be accessed through a defence from all that it is not, which in this case, is a ‘coloured’ identity. Whiteness, as Pleasantville would have it, is an impossible ideal. Instead

\(^{15}\) In her book *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz argues that there is a “correlation and association of the mind/body opposition with the opposition between male and female, where man and mind, woman and body, become representationally aligned”. Later on the same page, Grosz notes that the alignment of these terms is responsible for philosophy being founded “on the exclusion of women because it has established itself as a form of knowing, a form of rationality” (1994: 4).
of being characterised as a monolithic entity, whiteness is characterised as various fragments that can never constitute a whole because it is marked by crisis and irresolution.

*Pleasantville* addresses whiteness as a surface, a mask that suppresses non-normative identity formations. Big Bob’s claim that “This isn’t some virus that will clear up on its own” resonates with my analysis of *Safe*. If *Pleasantville* rejects the idea that their new conditions are of a viral nature, *Safe* argues that the virus is inevitably linked to the conditions of living in a postmodern and post-industrial world. The virus is an invisible entity that threatens to tarnish the surface of the body, gradually marking the body, spectacularising its whiteness. The masks of privileged whiteness are rendered visible in my analysis of *Safe* which investigates the way whiteness can also come to signify death and disease, absence and nothingness.

**White Pathologies: Safe**

While *Pleasantville* offers many close up shots of its leading white characters—allowing the viewer to register the narrative importance of the white face—*Safe* offers very few close up shots of anything. Instead, a minimalist approach is used insofar that the camera lingers over the surfaces of objects, bodies and spaces. All of the narrative action, excluding the last scene, is framed in long and medium shots. According to media theorist Nick Lacey, a long shot “sets a scene and/or places subjects into context”, but interestingly, a medium shot “places [the] audience at a ‘safe’ distance, near enough to observe but not intrude” (1998: 23).
The continued use of long and medium shots in *Safe* manipulates the way in which we respond to its themes of Environmental Illness, chemical sensitivity and New Age ‘cures’. In particular, the anti-heroine of *Safe*, Carol White (Julianna Moore)—a woman who suffers the effects of these semi-mythological conditions—is viewed with severe detachment as a result of these austere long shots because, as viewers, we are never allowed to identify with her struggles. This cinematic strategy of spectatorial detachment alienates Carol from the viewer, making it impossible to identify with her plight. Despite this stylised detachment, Carol is also positioned as a relational identity, whose condition has come about due to the domestic and public environment which she inhabits.

Directed by Todd Haynes (see Appendix 1.1), *Safe* is set in the affluent, post-industrial landscape of the San Fernando Valley, outside Los Angeles. Carol embodies all the broadsweeping pre-feminist characteristics that define a woman engulfed by domestic passivity. Carol has never even thought to question her subservient position in life. Carol’s life is ordered; she refers to herself as a “homemaker”, which includes the dutiful roles she has taken on as both wife and stepmother (to her husband’s young son). Consistently framed by sparse, over-clean surfaces, Carol’s existence seems readymade for domestic bliss as a result of her upper-middle-class privilege. Instead, things go horribly wrong as Carol begins to develop severe reactions to her seemingly safe and ordered

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16 In many recent U.S. films, the San Fernando Valley is represented not so much as the mere setting, but as a place that functions like the protagonist of the film. In *Safe*, Haynes depicts the idle discontents of the San Fernando Valley’s middle-class, while Paul Thomas Anderson sets his films *Magnolia* (2000) and *Boogie Nights* (1997) in ‘The Valley’, in an attempt to comment on the way in which the setting informs the dysfunctions of its broad spectrum of characters. Bruce Elder writes in relation to *Boogie Nights*, “Many directors have tried to catch life in ‘The Valley’... but never was the sleaze, the dreams, the poverty of humanity and the resilience of optimism of this suburban wasteland so poignantly captured” (2000: 14).
environment. Suddenly, Carol must question not only her day to day existence as a “homemaker”, wife and stepmother, but her place in an increasingly toxic environment that threatens to destroy her.

On first viewing, Safe appears to be a crisis narrative about the potential (and unforeseen) risks of living in an over-developed consumer culture. Human-made toxins, pollutions, artificial chemicals, sprays and rays have inevitably become the very thing that will kill us. Having been directed by Haynes, whose earlier film Poison (1990) was one of the instigators of New Queer Cinema (a film movement discussed in Chapter 4), it comes as no surprise that Safe can be read as a metaphoric narrative about AIDS set in the supposedly unlikely context of white, heterosexual privilege. Film critic Collier Schorr argues that the film “bracket[s] the AIDS crisis by implanting danger and susceptibility within the heterosexual orbit, without posing the ‘virus’ as antagonist” (1995: 87). Haynes has not dismissed the metaphoric link between Carol’s Environmental Illness and AIDS, but he is careful to suggest that the film was not meant to be simply read as an AIDS narrative. In an interview with Oren Moverman, Haynes says

I was particularly interested in Environmental Illness [EI] for what makes it distinct from AIDS. EI is a disease that is at a much earlier stage in its public visibility and perception, so that it brings with it all the mistrust and uncertainty about its very existence. That was never part of the early days of AIDS – people were dying from the beginning; you knew something was wrong immediately... EI is much more innocuous and less easily placed in somebody else’s backyard, and so the stigmas aren’t as well defined – that’s what I liked about it (Moverman, 1996: 213).
Safe functions as a metaphor for AIDS, in much the same way its concerns about Environmental Illness cannot be simply paralleled to the history of the AIDS crisis. That said, I would argue that Safe’s narrative of disease and alienation, along with its cinematic framing, suggest a narrative about whiteness itself being a site of potentially contaminated effects.

Whiteness is signified in very obvious ways in Safe. All the interiors are pristine; Carol’s taste in furniture and domestic objects are more often than not, white; even her family name is White.17 Carol’s body is a white surface; a shell of domestic passivity that is beginning to crack. Whiteness is used in Safe to signify a number of conflicting things. On the one hand, whiteness is used to signify health and hygiene; spirituality and light; class and race privilege. On the other hand, these signifiers of whiteness are paralleled to the sense of nothingness and invisibility that is evoked through Carol’s identity.

The first half of the film is concerned with representing Carol’s existence as a portrait of health and hygiene that is slowly being ruptured by disease. When Carol visits her doctor, after one of her first attacks, she explains that she doesn’t drink, smoke or take illegal drugs, and that she is simply a “milkaholic” (See Figure 1.5). After having attended an aerobics class, Carol is complimented because she does not sweat, to which she coyly replies, “I know, it’s true”. It’s as

17 Interestingly, and perhaps by coincidence, Carol and her husband Greg’s given names, both recall another hallmark of white middle-class American culture—“The Brady Bunch”. In this popular 1960’s sitcom, Carol is the stepmother of Greg, the eldest son of six children. On a number of levels Safe echoes the same set of socio-economic values of “The Brady Bunch”—or even Pleasantville for that matter—but calls these values into question as Carol White’s life becomes unstuck by disease and dysfunction. Carol White’s name also seems to reference Carrie White, the protagonist of Brian De Palma’s film Carrie (1976). Played by Sissy Spacek, Carrie White is a young woman whose telekinetic abilities are produced in time with her first period. Both Carol White and Carrie White are women who are transformed by either chemical or social toxicity, rendering them both, to different extents, as outcasts or ‘freaks’.
if Carol is some kind of ‘alien’, or a human who is just too ‘lucky’. It is no coincidence that the song used on the soundtrack during the aerobic scene is Madonna’s “Lucky Star”. This song acts like an ironic companion to Carol’s white life, especially because as we find out, she is not so “lucky” after all. The substanceless nothingness of (white) light is often used to signify whiteness and some of the song’s lyrics refer to light eradicating darkness:

You must be my lucky star/Cause you make the darkness seem so far/When I’m lost you’ll be my guide/I just turn around and you’re by my side/Come on shine your heavenly body tonight/Cause I know you’re gonna make everything all right (Madonna, 1982).

Everything does not turn out to be “all right” for Carol. The first half of the film does manage, however, to situate her within a domestic situation of class and race privilege, or “luck”, as it were.18

Following the first aerobic class is an exterior long shot of a suburban home which is lit by a strong shaft of sunlight piercing through the trees, forming the shape of a cross. The scene is idyllic and ordered; however, this order is disrupted by a car parked in the driveway on a forty-five degree angle, throwing the scene out of balance. Has something gone horribly wrong perhaps? The adjoining scene quells anxious spectatorial expectations, as the house belongs to Carol’s friend Linda (Susan Norman). Carol has visited to ‘comfort’

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18 Later in the film, Carol attends another aerobics class. The song in the background is Belinda Carlisle’s “Heaven is a Place on Earth”. Again used for ironic effect, the song lyrics allude to pop (or pap) sentiments about romantic love feeling like heaven on earth. At this point, however, Carol is so visibly shaken by her emerging and unexplained illness that she leaves the aerobics class. On her way out of the gym, she notices a flyer directed at survivors of Environmental Illness that reads “Do You Smell Fumes?” The health-conscious environment of the gym coupled with the song, contrasts Carol’s failing health and subsequent discovery of a potential solution.
Linda upon hearing the news of her brother’s death. In usual circumstances this may be a distressing situation, but we are never asked to identify with the people around Carol. They appear as cardboard cut-outs, surface effects, whiter than white props that serve only to heighten the white surfaces of both Carol’s body and surroundings. Furthermore, Linda relays the news with such detachment that she may as well be talking about something that had happened to someone else. It is unsurprising then, that Carol should ‘comfort’ Linda in a similarly detached manner. Scenes such as this manipulate spectatorial engagement; we expect some horrible experience to rupture Carol’s everyday experience. It is not surprising that this scene is a precursor to a chain of events where Carol’s safe existence begins to implode.

Figure 1.5
Carol drinks her regular dose of milk, while the housekeeper Fulvia (the real “homemaker” of Safe) looks on in the background.

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19 The dialogue in the scene is interesting not for what it includes but rather what is not said. When Linda tells Carol of her brother’s death, she replies “It wasn’t — “, to which Linda replies “It wasn’t … Not at all”. In the Director’s Commentary on the DVD edition of Safe (Sony Pictures Classics, 2002), Haynes fills in the blanks by stating that the missing, unspoken word was “AIDS”. This early scene in Safe is the first direct reference to AIDS, and is perhaps one of the reasons the film is often read as a metaphor for AIDS.
In another scene Carol restlessly wanders around her front garden late at night, confused about her mysterious disease. A passing local security service directs a spotlight suspiciously at Carol, and a security guard (whom we don’t see) asks her if anything is wrong. The spotlight almost assaults Carol’s body; for a moment it seems as if she is pinned against the wall because of the light’s strength. The light bleaches Carol’s face of its natural properties, ghost-like. Carol’s body is made visible not only by the light, but by the penetrative and authorial gaze situated behind it. The artificiality of the spotlight, or even the fluorescent and sterile lighting used in medical spaces where Carol is treated, renders her body passive and docile in contrast to the “all-seeing” regimens of power and knowledge that are performed by either security guards or medical practitioners represented in Safe. Dyer argues that “The culture of light is part of the still wider characterisation of modern Western culture as one that privileges seeing above all other senses” (1997: 103). Light is used in Safe to illuminate and spectacularise Carol’s face, rendering her visible to others, but paradoxically, it also emphasises the fact that she does not see herself.  

The way in which Safe is photographed heightens this sense of an “all-seeing” eye. The viewer has visual access to the mise-en-scene of the film through the use of many long and medium shots, but ultimately this effects a

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20 Julianne Moore’s initial audition reading for the part of Carol was slightly hindered when it was badly videotaped, rendering Moore almost invisible on screen. Haynes explains: “Now, for some reason the automatic focus on the video camera got jammed into some other focal length and the tape that we brought back to Los Angeles had just a blur of a face – it was sort of Carol White’s self-image on film. You couldn’t see anything, but the reading was extraordinary” (Moverman, 1996: 205-6). This account is eerie in relation to the completed film which represents Carol’s identity as symbolically invisible.
distancing that serves to represent Carol as if she were a stilted miniature that mutely interacts with her toxic environment. In this sense Safe is thematically similar to Haynes' earlier film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). In *Superstar* Haynes' recreates the life and death of 1970's pop icon Karen Carpenter, using animated Barbie doll miniatures as actors. *Safe* presents Carol White as a victim of her environment, like *Superstar* which, according to Coco Fusco, "draws parallels to analogous social phenomena and presents the pathology, anorexia, as an effect of culture" (1988: 18). *Superstar* is a parody because Karen Carpenter is represented by the Barbie doll, while *Safe* literally (and somewhat melodramatically) represents a woman whose identity is invisible to herself, and, in effect, governed by forces outside her reach and beyond her control. Figures 1.6 illustrates the way *Safe* renders the body small and inconsequential, and victim to either physical or spatial dislocation.

![Figure 1.6](image)

Figure 1.6
Carol appears to be miniaturised in her own environment. This image also depicts Carol's detached relationship with her husband.
If Carol does not see herself, it seems as if the things that she does see are trivial and based on subjective aesthetic taste. In one scene Carol returns home from her daily errands, and upon entering the lounge room, she cries with a strange sense of passive horror, "Oh, my God". The next shot provides us with a visual reference to Carol's distress: In place of the teal coloured couch that she had ordered sits a black couch. Instead of a strong sense of self-awareness, Carol only sees the surfaces of things, those very same surfaces that trigger her allergies. In one of the final scenes of the film, when Carol is living at the New Age retreat Wrenwood, she says to her peers that she is beginning to "see myself more as I am", which further illustrates the way in which she has never actually seen herself. In his reading of Safe, Roddy Reid describes the scene where Carol first discovers the offensive couch as one that toys with a spectator's expectations of impending horror, when in reality, the scene only presents us with an "aesthetic horror ... a mute stain on the pastel perfection of her home" (1988: 35).

Reid's critique of Safe primarily argues that the film "plays out the present-day experience of our bodies understood as sites of struggle between medical discourses, health-care practices, pathogens and visual inscriptions" (36). Reid makes a number of references to the film's "visual and acoustic surfaces" and "the very 'thereness' of things and social relations that shapes White's world" (35). What Reid does not make explicit reference to is White's white world, or even the "aesthetic horrors" of whiteness being contaminated—not only by a black couch in a house of pastels—but by toxins, pollution and diseases that are interchangeably represented as both visible and invisible. Carol's whiteness, like most contemporary examples of whiteness, is an invisible entity that does not acknowledge itself as a raced or marked thing. Her
whiteness is made visible when her condition worsens, which parallels the way in which toxins, pollution and disease are also invisible entities that only become visible when they threaten the white body, rendering it pale and sickly, and ultimately in Carol’s case, riddled with legions and sores.

In Reid’s critique of Safe, he argues that:

the film queers and goes against the grain of what could be called a “politics and epistemology of visibility” that operates at the intersection of practices of visual culture and official and alternative medicine. A complex visual culture of health and risk marks the 1990s; within it exist many promises to define bodies, name potential but invisible health hazards, and, consequently, govern individual and collective behavior in terms of a “visibleness” that articulates personal experience with learned, expert discourse (33).

Certainly Safe does render identity as invisible because of the very way in which Carol’s disease confounds “learned, expert discourse”; at one point her doctor recommends psychiatric treatment. Carol’s identity is quashed by institutional and medical regimes to the extent that she begins searching for alternative answers. It is because Carol is manipulated into believing that the problem exists in her head, rather than her body, that she is rendered a passive, non-autonomous being. Carol is, quite simply, nothing. It is this nothingness that, when juxtaposed with the invisibility of her identity, marks her as paradigmatically white. As a white woman, she is always already nothing. In other words, Carol is represented by Haynes as an unmarked, substanceless surface.

Carol is invisible, not only because her condition baffles medical authorities, but also because her identity as a white upper-middle-class homemaker already suggests that she lacks agency; she does not have a voice of her own.
Carol's voicelessness is consistently apparent throughout Safe. Whenever Carol speaks she does so in very fragmented sentences, consistently punctuating quotidian statements as if they were questions. It seems as if Carol only mimics things she may have heard before. At times other people even complete her sentences. For most of the film, Carol is inarticulate. When interviewed about Safe, Julianne Moore said that she "went above" the range of her own vocal chords. Moore explains that she did this because, "I wanted the sensation of [Carol's] voice not being connected at all to her body... [Carol] is someone who's completely disconnected from any kind of physicality, from any sense of being inside herself, from really knowing herself" (Moverman, 1996: 219). It is only when she writes a letter to Wrenwood, the New Age retreat that specialises in such cases, that she appears articulate. The difference here is that Carol's letter is a piece of controlled and precise writing, and because we hear its contents in a voiceover, there is no evidence to suggest that that she can articulate her concerns beyond the obvious. Carol writes (and speaks in voiceover):

My name is Carol White and I live in Southern California... For some time now I've not been feeling up to par and I thought your organisation may be of some help... I've always thought of myself as someone with a pretty normal upbringing and as basically a healthy person, but for the past several months this all started to change. Suddenly I find myself feeling sick.

At this point Carol's husband Greg (Xander Berkeley) enters the bedroom and attempts to engage in a mundane conversation in response to which she falters, becomes visibly upset and replies, "Oh God, what is this? Where am I? Right now?" Carol's crisis is that she does not recognise herself anymore. Carol is not
only invisible with regard to medical discourse; she is invisible to herself and cannot, therefore, function within any of the roles that she so effortlessly maintained as a privileged, white, upper-middle-class homemaker.

The way in which Carol is consistently framed at a ‘safe’ distance further alienates her from the viewer, and from those to whom she is supposed to relate. Intimacy is eschewed in Safe, right from the outset. In the opening scene, for example, Carol passively submits to Greg’s aggressive lovemaking; ultimately she appears removed from the situation. Figure 1.7 depicts another bedroom scene of physical and emotional detachment between Carol and Greg. As I stated earlier, Carol becomes more and more “alien-like” as the film progresses; a quality that is only intensified by the way she is consistently alienated within and by her milieu and visually cut off from the audience.\textsuperscript{21}

![Figure 1.7](image)

Intimacy is eschewed between Carol and Greg despite the bedroom location.

\textsuperscript{21} Arguably Todd Haynes intended on representing Carol as analogous to an alien or android with science fiction overtones. Before filming Safe, Haynes claimed that “I looked at 2001 [Stanley Kubrick, 1968]. I looked at films that took the notion of L.A. as a futuristic spaceland where every trace of nature had been completely superseded by man really far. L.A. is like an airport; you never breathe real air; you’re never in any real place; you’re in a transitional, carpeted hum zone—which is what I wanted to convey in Safe” (Schorr, 1995: 87).
If Carol finds herself feeling sick, and in effect, invisible, how does she slowly become marked and ultimately made visible? *Safe* is primarily a film about the invisible entities of health and identity. It is only through the subtle shifts in Carol’s character that her identity and body become apparent to herself. Carol does not see herself, and is therefore, out of touch with her identity. Paradoxically, Carol’s mysterious illness renders her as a spectacle to others and herself. Why else would she feel the need to keep apologising to people, even when there seems to be nothing amiss? The notion of spectacle is certainly made apparent through illness, but it is the literal and symbolic uses of the mask that reinforces Carol’s body as a site of spectacle. The first scene where Carol actually becomes a spectacle to herself and others is when she is rushed to hospital after collapsing. This scene, illustrated in Figure 1.8, is the first time her face is partly obscured by a mask.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 1.8**
Carol depends on an oxygen mask, while being rushed to hospital.

On a literal level, the mask comes to represent disease as spectacle when Carol finally accepts that her illness is indeed an environmental one, and to reduce the
effects of the illness, she begins wearing an oxygen mask. Carol is certainly not the only person to wear a gas mask at Wrenwood, but in Carol's case it seems at odds with the way she is camouflaged by her domestic haven earlier in the film, and becomes in effect, visually insignificant. The gradual narrative of deterioration and the way Carol becomes dependent on life support systems such as an oxygen mask contribute to the intensification of Carol as spectacle. When she moves to her igloo-like abode in Wrenwood, oxygen masks become a part of Carol's everyday life (Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9
Carol continues to depend on the oxygen mask at Wrenwood.

The mask primarily functions to produce Carol as spectacle in two ways: the aforementioned spectacle of literally implementing an oxygen mask, and secondly, the symbolic masks of whiteness as a signifier of both privilege and disease. In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler paraphrases Lacan when she argues that "the mask is part of the incorporative strategy of melancholy, the taking on of attributes of the object/Other that is lost, where loss is a consequence of a refusal
of love ... The mask, thus conceals this loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment” (1990: 48-50). What exactly has Carol lost, and more to the point, what is it that forms these symbolic masks?

Like the austere surfaces that define upper-middle-class respectability, Carol’s whiteness is a mask that encloses her in certain systems, whether it’s Southern California or another more corporeal system of signs. Before she becomes ill and experiences a breakdown, Carol appears as the embodiment of the Stepford wife.22 Though she refers to herself as a “homemaker”, Carol’s daily routine is made up of manicures and perms, baby showers and fruit diets. Carol’s Hispanic maid Fulvia is the homemaker; Carol is a woman who performs a particular version of what she is expected to be by her affluent husband and friends. Apart from Fulvia, the first half of the film presents flatly-conceived, rich white people whose lives have never been destabilised by something as threatening as Environmental Illness. Whiteness is a surface that comes to represent an invisible and socially acceptable norm. When Carol’s illness becomes more visible to those around her, it is appropriate that it should manifest in very visible and mask-like ways. Carol’s face gradually takes on anaemic qualities, associating her with sickness and death. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, in rather poetic terms, the contradictions of whiteness when she writes:

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22 *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975) is about a Connecticut community of upper-middle-class housewives who are idealised mostly because of their unblinking love of pleasing their husbands with sex and housework. All is not what it seems, because it is revealed that they are actually robots designed by their controlling husbands. It was announced on October 24, 2002 that Nicole Kidman will star as the lead character in a remake of *The Stepford Wives* to be directed by Frank Oz and completed late 2003. ([Internet Movie Database](http://us.imdb.com/WM?20021024#2)).
On women of all colors white refers... to virginity (to virginity as absence or to the absence of virginity) and the flirtations of the veil—to the ways in which our gender tries to construct us heterosexually as absence and as the dissimulating denial of it, and tries also to inscribe in us, as a standard of our own and other people's value, the zero-degree no-color of (not the skin of Europeans themselves but) the abstractive ideology of European domination. A white woman wearing white: the ruly [sic] ordinariness of this sight makes invisible the corrosive aggression that white also is: as the blaze of mourning, the opacity of loss, the opacity loss installs within ourselves and our vision, the unreconciled and irreconcilably incendiary energies streaming through that subtractive gap, that ragged scar of meaning, regard, address (1994: 255).

Sedgwick's comments on whiteness are particularly appropriate here because Carol's white pastel perfection is inevitably contrasted to the disintegration of this perfection. Carol's "zero-degree" nothingness and "the opacity of loss and mourning" come to be represented and inscribed on her face and body as markers (masks) of a different, more sinister kind of whiteness. In one scene, Carol watches an infomercial for Wrenwood that details how it is possible for a victim of Environmental Illness and chemical sensitivity to find solace and calm: "the goal is to get clear". This sense of clearness might suggest the same kind of invisibility that whiteness exudes. In Carol's case, the goal of clearness is psychic rather than physical. Carol begins to reconcile and overcome her internal self-loathing while at Wrenwood. Perhaps her doctor was right after all when, earlier in the film, he recommended psychiatric treatment? The last shot of Safe, presents Carol in a rare close-up, staring at herself in the mirror (camera) and repeating the words "I love you". Carol finally sees herself at the same time a viewer is granted a closer look at her face. While it seems that Carol is at last clear, Haynes takes an ironic stance, because her pale face is shadowed by dark bruises. Carol
can only see herself because environmental illness has marked her whiteness. While Carol is protected and supposedly ‘safe’ in her igloo-like bubble of exile, she appears worse than she did when she first started feeling sick.

This scene not only represents Carol’s whiteness as marked and stained by disease, but illuminates how she is ultimately a sad figure, dominated by melancholy and loss. As Butler argued, the mask functions out of loss, in particular, the loss or refusal of love. While Lacan’s initial formulation of this process positions loss in relation to the ‘other’, Carol’s loss is her rejection of everything that had initially shaped her, but more so, Carol has rejected herself. By embracing the New Age dogma of Wrenwood, Carol asserts a belief that self-loathing is the root of all sickness. It is, therefore, Carol’s own fault that she is sick. Carol’s masks of whiteness are shattered as she restlessly inhabits her safe place at Wrenwood, but unlike Butler and Lacan’s formulation of the mask as a device which conceals loss, the spectacle of Carol’s marked whiteness come to represent—not the loss of the ‘other’ and its subsequent incorporation through the mask—but the rejection of the healthy white self through both concealment and alienation.

At first glance Carol White is a rather ordinary character. On the surface, she could even appear quite banal and insipid. Similarly, the characters in Pleasantville are ordinary and archetypal despite the fantasy aspects of the narrative. This ordinariness might initially beset these characters, but eventually their everyday existences are transformed beyond all expectation. The characters in Pleasantville begin as caricatures that are normalised as events take place to disrupt their tidy universe. Ultimately, the introduction of colour brings about a transformation in Pleasantville, rendering these characters as perhaps not so
ordinary or average. Safe too presents Carol as a privileged, though ordinary character. As Carol becomes sick she is transformed into a rather “freakish” character. Freakish perhaps, not because of her illness, but rather the way in which it renders her as an empty spectacle of nothingness. It would seem that a spectacle of nothingness is a contradiction in terms, but it is because Carol’s identity is simultaneously rendered as both visible and invisible that she is regarded in this way. Safe is an ambiguous narrative because Carol’s transformation could also be her very disintegration. It remains to be seen if Carol could ever experience the transformation of “getting clear”, but there is one thing that seems fairly certain, and that is her inability to ever really be ‘safe’.

**Average White Maleness: American Psycho**

This chapter will be concluded by reflecting on the ordinariness of white identity, especially as it relates to Mary Harron’s film American Psycho (2000). Based on Bret Easton Ellis’ notorious novel of 1991, American Psycho shares a number of affinities with Safe. Both films delight in the sheer surface of things in order to critique or satirise those very surfaces. Like Safe, American Psycho emphasises the literal and symbolic masks that conceal and, inevitably, reveal the identity of the subject. Whiteness dominates American Psycho in much the same way it does in Safe, in that it is used to signify contrasting elements such as privilege and health, sterility and death. For my purposes, I do not wish to simply project my critique of Safe onto American Psycho, though I will underscore this emphasis on surface as it is crucial to the film. More importantly, I am
interested in the way that *American Psycho* represents an extension of "average white maleness"—a concept that emerged in response to Joel Schumacher's film *Falling Down* (1993).

*American Psycho* is the story of Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), a Wall Street trader whose life is not simply privileged, it is indulgent. Bateman, named after Norman Bates from Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), epitomises all the ideals that attend straight white masculinity: he is exceedingly handsome, possessing a sculpted muscular body; he attracts a number of beautiful white women; his career requires very little effort or work, but endows him with much wealth; he is in a position to indulge all his materialistic desires, which include obscene amounts of cocaine, a rigorous beauty regime, a spectacular apartment, and a wardrobe consisting only of *haute-couture* garb. Patrick Bateman is not average at all: had he chosen not to work on Wall Street, he could have been, with the right publicist, a superstar or politician.

Perhaps it is because Bateman has everything, but lacks cultural or social importance, that he sets out to be notorious as a serial killer. It seems that Bateman is disenchanted with being perceived as ordinary, invisible and (as one of his colleague remarks) "a dork", that he begins his rampage of, not mergers and acquisitions, but "murders and executions". The first person Bateman kills is Paul Allen (Jared Leto), a smug executive who is more successful in Bateman's eyes. For example, Allen is always able to get a table at Dorsia—the hippest, most exclusive restaurant in the city—and whenever Bateman has tried he has been unsuccessful. The fact that Allen continually mistakes Bateman for another colleague, Halbestram, only makes matters worse, while further illustrating Bateman's social invisibility. It is implied that Bateman secretly wants to be
Halbestram because, even though Halbestram never appears on screen, it seems that this absent figure is more of a success. Allen’s mistake bothers Bateman, but instead of correcting him, Bateman bludgeons him to death with an axe.

This scene propels a series of similarly gruesome, though comically staged, murders. It also provides an insight into Bateman’s character in a way that the other scenes do not. Most significant is the way that it begins by depicting Bateman’s identity as interchangeable with other male executives represented around him. While preening himself with the latest range of skin care products, Bateman acknowledges (in a voiceover) that his identity is not grounded or “real”:

There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman: some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me; only an entity, something illusory. And although I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are comparable, I simply am not there.

This self-description occurs in the opening scenes and implies that he is a generic man, a product of consumerism in just the same way he is a consumer of products: a fact highlighted by the constant reference to brand names. In Figure 1.11 and 1.12, Bateman’s face is masked by a range of facial products, which would not ordinarily take on so many connotations. However, they elicit a creepiness, primarily because as his bloodlust increases he begins to lose his grip on reality. Fifteen minutes later in the film, Bateman says, “my mask of sanity is about to slip”. The constant use of these facial mask products, therefore, suggest a flimsy attempt to purify and rejuvenate an identity that can never be clean;
they are meant to enhance the face, allowing it to shine brighter than before, but Bateman continues to be invisible, concealed, nothing.

![Figure 1.10](image1)

Bateman's relaxation mask renders him slightly menacing.

![Figure 1.11](image2)

Although Bateman is peeling away a facial mask, he may as well be peeling away layers of his identity, because as he says in voiceover, "I simply am not there".

Instead of being noticed, Bateman is one of countless other white executives who live and work in an identical manner. Through his voiceover commentaries, we see that all the white male characters are alike in that they
share similar suits, haircuts, accessories, and even names. Bateman and his colleagues even compete for the most impressive business card, when in all actuality their cards are differentiated by very subtle gradations of whiteness, paper type, lettering and embossing. It is because Bateman is not at all unlike his colleagues that he is often mistaken for them, a mistake he never rectifies because he acknowledges his invisibility: "I simply am not there".

Bateman is paradigm of whiteness as invisible. The characters in *Pleasantville* acquire their identities as colour is introduced to the town, while in *Safe*, Carol's ailing health produces her identity as simultaneously visible and invisible. In *American Psycho*, Bateman is never really visible to himself or others and the main reason for this is that his identity as a privileged white male is not simply linked, but rather camouflaged, by the surfaces around him. His apartment, on West 81st Street in New York City (though really a set in a Canadian warehouse), is almost entirely white and bathed in sunlight: a sterile container of surfaces analogous to his own identity. Bateman's privilege and prestige is the very thing that slowly brings him unstuck, forcing a detachment from himself and others. The only aspect of the film that Ellis ever criticised was Bateman's voiceover: "I'm not a fan of its voiceover (it's always too explicit)" (*American Psycho* Official Site). It might be explicit, but it does assist in raising an interesting question: if someone is aware of their invisibility, are they not rendered visible through the act of confession?

Bateman's voiceover makes him visible only to the audience, while he is still very much invisible to those who exist around him. Bateman is invisible throughout the film primarily because his identity as a white male already produces him as such. The narrated voiceover perpetuates Bateman's invisibility
because a voiceover is always disembodied, separated from the person to whom it relates. As a cultural norm whiteness is invisible. Dyer argues that “White people need to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange” (1997: 10). One of the first steps towards making whiteness visible is identifying white as unique, different and not merely a cultural norm. Bateman does indeed see his particularity—as “illusory”—but never actually attributes it to his whiteness, let alone his masculinity. Bateman certainly makes strange his identity, as he becomes a menacing serial killer, but his whiteness is assumed as the norm, in much the same way that his privilege, maleness, and heterosexuality are also assumed to be normative. There is evidence to support the view that Bateman’s identity is an assumed one because in a number of conversations he argues that racism and sexism are problematic concepts which must be stopped. In context, his comments are merely satirical sound bites, and never taken seriously. Bateman’s slogan-like political correctness is a hollow reminder that the exact opposite is true: Bateman is racist, classist, homophobic and misogynistic. It is interesting to note that while he may be a racist, he worships black pop star Whitney Houston. Perhaps this does not count because as a star, she is a popular culture phantasm: she is just as illusory and unreal as Bateman.

Bateman’s hatred of others is really a hatred of himself, echoed regularly by his narration. In many respects self-loathing is a defence mechanism that protects the subject from being the target of others’ hatred or prejudice. Annalee Newitz writes, “white identity is doomed to remain trapped in a cycle of self-torture and self-celebration” (1997: 152). Newitz is pointing out the way in which white identity has become a self-conscious identity, and racked by internal
contradictions. Is it our history of white power and racism that has produced such guilt and defensive behaviour? Whatever the case, “white racial self-consciousness is based on various forms of divisiveness and self-loathing” (Newitz, 133). Bateman certainly does not practice a literal form of self-torture, but there is a direct relationship between his fractured view of himself, and the way in which he relates to (or kills) others.

Bateman attempts to project an image of social awareness in conversation, but is really just mimicking politically correct views that ultimately aim to counter the culturally central position of white masculinity. It is arguable, even with his satirical intentions, that anybody really listens to him at all. Perhaps such views are not supposed to be articulated by the straight white male, because in all actuality the assumed privilege of the straight white male is the reason such views have come to pass. Who really wants to listen to the self-aggrandising claims of a man who, on the surface, appears to have it all?

Unsurprisingly, whiteness emerged as a concept within cultural studies that aimed to destabilise its unquestioned authority, in much the same way that political correctness emerged to decenter straight white male privilege. The one film that initially resonated with critics of whiteness was *Falling Down* because of the way it represented straight white masculinity as an identity in crisis. The protagonist D-Fens (Michael Douglas) is so frustrated and disillusioned that he gradually descends into madness, brought about because of the (supposed) injustices directed at him. After a series of crimes, D-Fens is wanted by the police; D-Fens however, cannot reconcile the fact that he is a wanted man: “I’m the bad guy?” Though he had committed crimes, D-Fens is incredulous more because he passes through black and Hispanic communities, where crime is
commonplace. Furthermore, D-Fens is an average white working-class male, whose identity revolves around his position as an (unsuccessful) father, husband and worker.

Film critic Carol Clover defines D-Fens within the orbit of the “average white male” who is perceived as “infinitely endowed with wealth and privilege but in the real individual case, running on fumes: nerves fraying guilt, and down to an insurance policy” (1993: 145). More specifically, the “average white male” is the man who, by virtue of being white, should not be confronted by his normativity; it should be assumed, innate and unquestioned. Clover writes, “The Average White Male is the guy who theoretically owns the world but in practice, in this account, not only has no turf of his own but has been closed out of the turf of others” (144).

Patrick Bateman, for all intents and purposes is not an average white male. If we compare him to D-Fens, it is obvious that class divides them. Bateman is a self-described “yuppie” with all the perks of an executive lifestyle, coupled by the fact that he is a bachelor, while D-Fens is a working class citizen, who might have occupied relative comfort had it not been for his series of marital and nervous breakdowns. What they do have in common is a crumbling white identity that has somehow traded automatic privilege and power for defensiveness, self-consciousness, paranoia, self-loathing and madness. Both Bateman and D-Fens are all of these things to lesser or greater degrees, and it is these characteristics that are linked to the way they perceive their identities as straight white males. While Bateman may not on first glance occupy a position of “averageness” based on a marker of class, his greatest fear seems to be the fact that he really is just an average man with money. Take away the cash and very
little exists, because as he himself surmises, he is “illusory” and “not really there”.

I am focusing on this concept of average white masculinity in relation to *American Psycho*, because it is a concept that has proliferated on screen in recent years. Edward Norton’s character Jack in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) is comfortable in his Ikea-furnished paradise, but it is this very comfort that induces his pathological insecurities. Kevin Spacey’s seemingly ordinary character Lester Burnhan in *American Beauty* also occupies a position of relative comfort in his upper-middle-class environment, but it does not exempt him from a mid-life crisis where he transcends his ordinariness through a drastic and somewhat comic lifestyle makeover. The film’s tag-line “Look closer” suggests that one must confront and uncover that which lies beneath the surface of ordinary, respectable, average white masculinity. More recently, the Coen brothers (who will be discussed in Chapter 2 and Appendix 2.2) made *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001), a film centered around the persistent ordinariness and metaphoric invisibility of barber Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton). While the dominant racial whiteness of this vision of late 1940s suburban America is heightened by the black and white cinematography, it is Ed’s acknowledgement that he is ordinary, and hence invisible, that propels the film’s drama. In one scene he says in voiceover: “I was a ghost. I didn’t see anyone. Nobody saw me. I was the barber”. Moreover, the recurring theme of the film is stated in one simple line of dialogue: “the more you look the less you see”, which counters *American Beauty*’s insistence that one must “look closer” into themselves if they are to change the banality of their everyday realities.
In *American Psycho* the average white male is represented through a satire of both corporate male identity and the 1980s—the decade of greed which supposedly produced such a man. The things this figure might be capable of being or doing are represented through the most extreme worst-case scenario because satire allows such exaggerations to appear plausible, or at least entertaining. On another level *American Psycho* hints at a deepening level of madness for the average white male, whereby all of Bateman's crimes are perhaps imagined — a series of over-the-top crimes unconsciously invented to make him feel more important than he really is. Of course, this backfires when nobody believes him and furthermore, when the people he has supposedly murdered have been sighted, alive. Whether or not his crimes are real or imagined is never really stated, but exists in the film as a tension, a mere possibility. Ellis' novel leans more towards a perception that Bateman has imagined his crimes, because as the narrative comes to its rather non-eventful climax, Bateman's hallucinations have greater resonance, and his internal confusion is represented in more explicit terms.

In her book *Bad Girls and Sick Boys*, feminist cultural critic Linda Kauffman draws analogies between a number of disparate cultural productions by writers, artists and filmmakers, all of whom employ the mechanics of fantasy to represent their subject. In one chapter, "Masked Passions", Kauffman dissects the debates central to the novel *American Psycho*. With much flair, Kauffman argues against critics who had condemned the novel as pornographic and identifies the novel as a satire more about the processes of fantasy and consumption, than it is about serial killing. Kauffman identifies the key tenets of the novel: "the compulsion to repeat, an addiction to representations, and the analogy between serial killing.
and serial consumption" (1998: 255). If American Psycho is indeed concerned with the analogy between serial killing and serial consumption, then it is obvious that Bateman's obsession with commodities is, in large part, responsible for his emergent serial killing. He sees them as linked, if not the same thing. They both necessitate the accumulation and fetishisation of things or bodies.

Bateman is also addicted to representations, because they enable him to construct an image that oscillates between a successful executive and a seemingly successful (if not unstable) serial killer. But it seems that he is also addicted to the popular, though waning, representation of straight white masculinity as privileged and powerful by virtue of birth and/or wealth. Initially Bateman unconsciously falls for the trappings of whiteness, and is lured into a false sense of security. It is only when he exhibits signs of being average, that he must execute those who are either inferior and perhaps more average (prostitutes, homeless people, etc.), or those, like his colleague Allen, who are potentially superior and never exhibit signs of being average. For Bateman, averageness is to be feared at all costs, because if you are rich, straight, white and male, there is nothing more threatening or humiliating than being cut down to size.

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Privileged whiteness is increasingly being represented on screen as an identity that can no longer claim access to privilege simply on the grounds of race. Even when whiteness and privilege go hand in hand, as they do with the examples discussed in this chapter, it becomes clear that both race and class must be
separated out and analysed for the way they function independent of one another, as much as for the way they overlap.

The privilege of the characters in Pleasantville, Safe and American Psycho often marks them, and renders their whiteness visible. In Pleasantville, whiteness is configured in a 1950’s context as an unconscious social formation that contrasts with the film’s knowing, socially-aware 1990s protagonists. Initially in Safe, Carol White’s whiteness is represented as “clear”, invisible and unmarked. Despite Carol’s attempts to regulate order within her upper-middle-class milieu, the environment around her becomes increasingly toxic, rendering her a diseased subject whose whiteness is made visible through its disintegration. For Patrick Bateman of American Psycho, the vapid excess of his white male corporate identity cannot save him from being one of the most average serial killers represented on screen. Bateman may appear to have it all, but as he states himself, “I simply am not there”. His privileged whiteness is represented in a manner that is almost identical to the other white male executives around him. For this reason, Bateman’s identity is an ongoing disappearing act.

These filmic case studies have demonstrated that class does indeed mark whiteness. But how is whiteness marked when other class identities are considered? In particular, how does the category of white trash decentre and contaminate whiteness? How does white trash become the ‘film’ on whiteness? In Chapter 2 I will continue to examine the tensions of whiteness, but focus this discussion on representation of white trash characters and themes that emerge in three contemporary U.S. films.
CHAPTER 2
WHITE TRASH

As I argue in Chapter 1, white identity must be called into question because it has held a long history of cultural normativity and privilege. Whiteness signifies cleanliness, virtue and hygiene, even if it occasionally comes undone as I argue through *Pleasantville*, *Safe* and *American Psycho*. How then does white trash figure in the model of whiteness that has been established? White trash dirties whiteness, rendering it visible. The resentment, hostility and discrimination that privileged whites harbour towards white trash serves to create a class polarisation within white culture, and furthermore, white culture is reminded of its very whiteness. To acknowledge one’s own whiteness is to acknowledge that whiteness is an identity like any other—one that does not necessarily go unnoticed. When white culture points its finger at white trash it knows that the existence of the white ‘other’ has the potential to unmask the supposed privilege and superiority of whiteness. The saturation of white trash figures in twentieth and twenty-first century cinema and popular culture indicates a growing awareness of the way that racial and class identities are not always polarised in terms of black and white or rich and poor, but increasingly so in terms of white and white trash, black and black trash and so on. Newitz and Wray argue:

Furthermore, white trash, since it is racialized (i.e. different from “black trash” or “Indian trash”) and classed (trash is social waste and detritus), allows us to understand how tightly intertwined racial and class identities actually are in the United States (1997a: 4)
If white trash is a poor relation to whiteness, separated out by the term ‘trash’, then it becomes apparent that white identity never clarifies its class privilege. On its own, the word ‘white’ always already suggests privilege. It is for this reason that privileged whites feel the need to mark white trash, by naming them human trash.

In this chapter I will examine the way white trash identity is represented in three contemporary U.S. films: Gummo, Lawn Dogs and O Brother, Where Art Thou?. In cinematic terms, Gummo is the only film of the three to adopt a low budget, trash aesthetic, perhaps because its subjects do not appear to have any ties to privileged whiteness. Gummo (1997) represents a microcosm of poor whites who inhabit a small town in Ohio. In this sense it could be argued that Gummo does at times attempt to produce itself as an authentic white trash cultural text, which comes as no surprise since its director and writer, Harmony Korine, is a young filmmaker who chooses to inhabit the margins of filmmaking, despite the critical acclaim and exposure his work as both writer and filmmaker has received (see Appendix 2.1). Lawn Dogs (1997) and O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000) do not adopt a white trash aesthetic, but are rather, films that represent the difficult relationship between privileged whiteness and white trash identities. Yet while Lawn Dogs and O Brother, Where Art Thou? can be distinguished from Gummo for these reasons, I have chosen these three films to discuss in detail together for the following reasons.

Firstly, the white trash characters of Gummo are for the most part children or teenagers who are rarely depicted in relation to their parents or families. These characters do not acknowledge or perform social norms and this is evident in the
way a number of them commit heinous acts to others and themselves. The characters in *Gummo* are white trash not only because they exist within a poor socio-economic context, but because they adhere to a large number of stereotypes about white trash as morally and socially dysfunctional. The fact that Korine has chosen to represent this through a very young cast essentialises white trash in the same way that white trash was perceived in Nicole Rafter’s study on the link between eugenics and white trash in the late nineteenth century. The absence of accepted social norms in *Gummo* stems from parental neglect, which marks—or perhaps scars—them as abject trash.

The second part of this chapter will analyse the sexualised model of white trash identity that emerges in John Duigan’s film *Lawn Dogs*. In particular I will discuss the way white trash identity simultaneously becomes a spectacle of shame and desire when positioned in stark contrast to a community of privileged white people. I will also briefly discuss the way Trent, the white trash character of *Lawn Dogs*, knows he is figured as trash. When he jokingly names himself as white trash, he claims his white trashness on his own terms, diffusing the cruel sting that is usually associated with being named as trash.

I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of Joel Coen’s *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* In particular, I will discuss the way this film uses a soundtrack of country music to aurally signify much of the film’s white trash aesthetic. The relationship between country music and white trash has a well-documented history (Ching, 1997; Peterson, 1997), and it is for this reason that I will discuss this film’s attempt to align its white trash outlaws with “old-timey” American music of the 1920s and 30s. Such music is used to authenticate white trash as rural, impoverished, simple-minded and sweet. The authenticity of white trash
largely depends on an authentic performance of country music, one that is
dependent on staging a particularly commodifiable white trash image.

Breeding White Trash: Eugenics, Abjection and Gummo

The opening credit sequence of Gummo depicts a montage of (supposedly) found
home video footage of the aftermath of a tornado that hit Xenia, Ohio in April,
1974.¹ A young boy’s voice narrates these scenes with a matter-of-factness that is
strangely beguiling: “A few years ago a tornado hit this place. It killed people left
and right… Houses were split open and you could see necklaces hanging from
branches of trees… I saw a girl fly through the sky and I looked up her skirt”.

By focussing on the devastation of this tornado in the opening sequence, Korine
sets the intimate tone of Gummo and establishes the physical and emotional
devastation imparted by this natural disaster. A majority of the vignettes in the
opening sequence feature poor white children or teenagers — a clue that what
follows will be represented from a youthful perspective. Unsurprisingly, most
reviews of Gummo and the official press notes for the film linger on the fact that
Korine was 23-years old when the film was made, evidence that Gummo’s
portrayal of young people is meant to be authentic and insightful, rather than
exploitative.

The first two points I have noted are unsettling when linked together: a
tornado hit a town some 25 years ago and its legacy of emotional or physical

¹ The tornado in question hit Xenia on April 3, 1974. According to the Xenia tourist
information web site, the tornado “killed 33, destroyed almost half of the city’s buildings
and made 10,000 homeless. Nine schools, nine churches and 180 businesses perished but
the city still had the courage to bounce back and make Xenia what it is today”
www.ci.xenia.oh.us/history.html
damage is to be found, not in the landscape, but in the children that have since been born, as if the place itself had cursed anything produced thereafter. The horrifying acts of violence, prostitution and sexual abuse in *Gummo* all take place in an atmosphere of parental neglect. Adults are rarely seen, and when they are on screen, they are violent, abusive, drunk or on drugs. Film critic Felicia Feaster, writes, "*Gummo*’s is a world de-populated of grown-ups. Their very absence is attested to in the blank generation they have spawned... *Gummo*’s monstrous, tragic children play in the shade of their diseased family trees" (1998: 41). Feaster’s comments highlight the film’s representation of white trash as the products of defective lineage. The backdrop of a tornado merely provides a dramatic context, and buys into the numerous stereotypes associated with white trash. For example, one popular joke states that tornados always hit white trash communities or trailer parks because it is God or nature’s way of cleaning up the trash.

The cast of social misfits in *Gummo* are represented as defective white trash for two reasons. Firstly, they are reminders of the myth that white trash is somehow an inherited problem, as if the genetic sins of the family can be passed down through the generations. Secondly, white trash is often mythologised as the product of a defective location, the kind of landscape that, for example, is ‘contaminated’ by tornados or other natural disasters. If the landscape is defective for one reason or another, it usually follows that those who live there will also be defective. The case is usually stronger for children who are born into these environments. The location of *Gummo* — Xenia, Ohio — is not contaminated in literal terms. It has been many years since the tornado, so any physical evidence of the tornado’s damage has since been repaired. Instead, the ‘damage’
has been done symbolically, in the way its inhabitants are emotionally and spiritually empty.

The characters in *Gummo* are, without a doubt, white trash. The film itself emerges at a time in the late twentieth century when the concept of white trash has earned a certain level of cultural worth, a trend which seems to drive the current wave of white trash representations in American cinema. The contradiction, however, is that the kind of white trash subjects represented are not unlike the eugenic studies of rural poor whites from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. *Gummo* allows for a discussion of some of the key themes associated with white trash identity. Eugenics, a practice that emerged in the late nineteenth century in both anthropological and scientific contexts, was a way of attributing the existence of white trash people and communities to supposedly defective genes. I will outline the impact that eugenics has had on the notion of white trash because, while the practice of eugenics has long been exploded, it helped shape a negative cultural concept of white trash, one which still exists today. I will argue that this eugenic theory of white trash helped produce an *essentialist* and *abject* concept of white trash.

Coined by Francis Galston in 1883, the term eugenics has been defined as:

> A set of political beliefs based on the idea that intelligence and personality are fixed inherited characteristics determining role and position in society. Eugenicists believe that breeding should be restricted among those of the ‘lower’ classes of society, and that those of subnormal intellect or undesirable personality should be sterilized to prevent the spread of such genetic characteristics (Stratton and Hayes, 1993: 66).
When poor whites became the focus of eugenics in the late nineteenth century, the focus shifted away from the attempt to improve the body—perhaps the white trash body was too trashed to mend—and rather an attempt to explain the reasons for such genetic aberrations. If the white body was considered socially inadequate or simply unhealthy, the family history was the key site to test the theory that degeneracy was passed on through the generations. Eugenicists were interested in upholding their own privileged and sober understandings of whiteness, and would attempt to explain behavioural problems, such as alcoholism, prostitution and incest, as directly linked to bad or ‘impure’ breeding. In Gummo, white trash is the product of defective lineage (or quite simply parental neglect). The presence of alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, homosexuality, incest, and sexual abuse in Gummo, would be interpreted by a eugenicist as genetically motivated.

In her edited book on these white trash family studies, Nicole Rafter (1988) argues that eugenics “also appealed as a myth of the origins of social problems... It is a myth that invents a menace, the half-witted Grendel-like stranger who likes to live in hollow logs and decrepit shanties—a White Trash myth, to be sure, but with a dimension of danger” (30). As Rafter suggests, white trash has as much to do with the landscape it inhabits (“hollow logs and decrepit shanties”) as it does the social or scientific frameworks on which poor whiteness is imposed. The fact that Gummo’s characters inhabit a town haunted by the spectre of a long-gone tornado only emphasises the way they are produced as defective simply because of where they live.

One of the most common stereotypes associated with white trash in contemporary culture is that it is deviant, defective, and responsible for criminal,
deviant and monstrous activity. *Gummo* is one such film that aligns white trash with such behaviour, but the film cannot be dismissed outright as being a stereotypical representation of white trash. *Gummo*’s children might “play in the shade of their diseased family trees”, but they are not pathologised by the filmmaker. I would argue that Korine initially sets up a narrative that pathologises white trash, but he does so because it provides an entry point for viewers to be able to identify the way that certain markers of identity, namely poverty, position these characters as ‘other’. Once this familiar cultural and economic image of white trash is established, Korine shatters all expectations in the way he counters traditional narrative genres of film.

*Gummo* explicitly rids itself of a formal narrative structure, in favour of a series of vignettes that orbit around a core group of characters. These main characters are Solomon (Jacob Reynolds) and Tummler (Nick Sutton) who kill stray cats and sell them to the local Chinese restaurant. Solomon lives with his widowed mother (Linda Manz); their relationship provides the only real instance where parental presence and affection can be found (Tummler’s father also makes a brief appearance). The relationship between sisters Dot (Chloë Sevigny) and Helen (Carisa Bara) directly mirrors Solomon and Tummler. While the boys enact a particular version of masculinity that is defined by violence and macho sexuality, the girls seem obsessed with the idea that femininity is defined in relation to their view of ‘what boys want’. All the other characters—who are mostly non-actors—appear in the film randomly, and without any sense that their stories or presence directly fuels the film’s drama. It is for this reason that Korine has been likened to a documentary filmmaker because he attempts to speak the ‘truth’ or authenticity about his subjects.
As Feaster notes, "Korine’s failure to latch this story onto one character’s consistent viewpoint alienates and fractures our response to the film, a unique strategy for conveying the disorienting, centerless amorality of the world he documents" (43). Korine resists traditional narrative form because the subjects of his film do not necessarily fit the mould of what constitutes narrative form. Moreover, Feaster argues that "To center a film on one protagonist is to buy into a classical Hollywood schemata invested in America’s self-identity; of heroism, of objectives ultimately rewarded, of authority, which it is Korine’s goal to shatter" (43). If the destabilising narrative of Gummo deliberately authenticates the lives of its white trash subjects, then we are left with a cast of characters whose identities are unstable because ultimately that is how Korine views white trash. While the film approximates some of the conventions of documentary filmmaking—hand-held camera, the supporting cast of non-actors, non-linear narrative—it is a scripted film that contrives a number of situations, even if they occasionally appear ‘real’ or ‘authentic’.

In an interview with well-known American artist Mike Kelley,² Korine states:

We tried really hard to have images come from all directions. If I had to give [this style] a name, I’d call it a ‘mistake-ist’ art form—like science projects, things blowing up in my face, what comes of that ... There was a script, but as a screenwriter, I’m so bored with the idea of following a script. I felt like I had the

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² Kelley and Korine produce work that traverse similar themes of youth, deviance, abjection, and destabilise notions of high and low art. Simon Taylor writes, “[Kelley’s] found, handmade stuffed animals ... ordinarily considered too trivial or unworthy to be seen in an art context, represent the epitome of low (‘white-trash,’ infantile, and regressive) culture” (1993: 69).
movie in the script so we’ll shoot the script but then shoot everything else and make sense of it in the editing process (Kelly, online).

Korine must not have been too “bored” with the idea of a script, because in 2002 he published it in book form as part of his Collected Screenplays 1. Inconsistencies aside, Korine’s (faux) documentary style makes him appear as if he is an anthropologist of sorts, interested in documenting the supposed realities or conditions of his subject. But are they white trash specimens for what he dubs his “science project”? I would argue that the film is not simply exploitative. Rather, it resorts to a number of white trash stereotypes in order to take them a step further and question them. This strategy is similar to a strategy of ‘shock value’ whereby, an audience will be viscerally horrified or disgusted by what is represented. The idea of ‘shock value’ will be explored further in Chapter 3 through my discussion of John Waters. Perhaps it is necessary to explode white trash stereotypes through shock, because it is often expected that white trash will be initially framed within a ‘freakish’ or ‘abnormal’ context, but then downplayed so as not to offend the majority of the audience. In other words, Gummo emerged not long after Sling Blade (Billy Bob Thornton, 1996) where all the same stereotypes are evident, even if they are reversed to create an unlikely white trash hero. In Gummo, there are no heroes, just a group of disenchanted youths who exist without the usual narrative resolution, the occasional crisis of conscience, and the obligatory moral epiphany.
In the previous chapter I attempted to identify what it means to be white, and therefore privileged. A discussion of white trash must take into account whiteness as a racial marker, but class forms a large part of any analysis of white trash identity. In order to address some of these questions and concerns mentioned in relation to *Gummo* it is necessary to discuss this notion of class, because white trash primarily refers to a form of whiteness that is ‘trash’ because of its position as poor, or even working class. Surely the characters in *Gummo* subscribe to this as they inhabit an environment that is working class. Most of its cast, however, are children or teenagers who do not yet work, either because they are too young and should be in school, or because they are employable but are either listless, bored, or otherwise occupied with their own entrepreneurial activities (such as killing cats for cash). The class positioning of their parents—as working class or unemployed—is more identifiable. If we define class as something that can only be realised when one is of a certain age to be pursuing employment, then surely we might go as far as to suggest that the children of *Gummo* are *white trash-in-progress*. Not-quite white trash, you could say. But all subjects are marked by class, in much the same way that all subjects are marked by other identity traits. Perhaps a definable class positioning is something that cannot be fully realised until one is an independent adult, because as we see from the young characters in *Gummo*, their white trashness directly descends from the way we view their environment and living conditions—an environment facilitated by their mostly absent parents and guardians, who we can only assume exist.
One of the problems when discussing class is that it is often perceived as an essential component of identity. If one is born into a white trash family, it is usually inconceivable that the subject in question will ever be able to transcend their white trashness. I use the word ‘transcend’ with caution, and for this reason: one misconception about white trash is that it is an identity that is so ‘low’ that the only way out is up. In other words, if one rejects their white trash background, the only option available is a class position that will surpass the supposed undesirability of the former. If white trash is an identity that marks the subject permanently and at an early age, by virtue of being born into such conditions, then white trash becomes an innate and essential identity category. But how can white trash simultaneously be innate and marked? As far as essentialist arguments go, an innate aspect of identity is something that is given and immutable.³

Essentialism inevitably evokes questions of gender and sex, which seems at odds with my insistence that a politics of class, specific to white trash, must be addressed. Class and race, like any identity categories, are often conceptualised within essentialist terms. In one of their essays on white trash, Newitz and Wray acknowledge the way in which race is often essentialised:

When we think about race in the United States, we often find ourselves constrained by categories we have inherited from a kind of essentialist multiculturalism, or what we call vulgar multiculturalism. Vulgar multiculturalism holds that racial and ethnic groups are “authentically” and

³ For the most part, essentialism rears its head in feminist debates, and is primarily perceived as a way to explain or conceptualise female identity. “Essentialism”, according to Diana Fuss, “is classically defined as a belief in true essence—that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing” (1989: 2). Essentialism does not mark the subject because an essence is substanceless.
essentially different from one another and that racism is a one way street: it proceeds out of whiteness to subjugate nonwhiteness, so that all racists are white and all victims of racism are nonwhite (emphasis in original, 1997b: 168).

Newitz and Wray note the way racism does not always so blatantly configure the ‘other’ as those who are supposedly different on an ‘essential’ level. I will return later in this chapter to the way white trash often functions as a racist slur. For now, I wish to emphasise the notion of “vulgar multiculturalism” because it underscores the way racial groups are often essentialised or authenticated as a way of explaining their differences. “Vulgar multiculturalism” configures racism as the domain of privileged whites, as if racism has an originating point of reference. Perhaps then, Newitz and Wray’s critique is directed at the way privileged whiteness seeks to redeem its history of racist mistakes by prioritising ideas based around multiculturalism. If anything, this conception of multiculturalism is vulgar because it invokes essentialist ideas, which in themselves are predominately white Western ideas that rarely account for racial, let alone class, difference.

As I have noted already, a recurring and potentially damaging white trash stereotype is one that pathologises poverty. This occurs when white trash is regarded as deviant and criminal, a social problem that is inherited and genetic. Rafter’s research into the relationship between white trash and eugenics is the first instance where the notion of white trash is articulated within contemporary academia (1988). This, in itself, suggests that white trash has had a ‘shady’ past, because if its first baby steps towards social intelligibility are in the wasteland of
eugenics, then surely white trash was initially regarded as an identity or condition that was essential and innate.

Eugenics depends on an essentialist concept of identity, though of course, the link between eugenics and essentialism is often unspoken (or perhaps unconscious). Within the framework of eugenics, white trash is always the product of ‘bad’ genes, mixed blood, or an otherwise ‘abnormal’ lineage. According to eugenicists, white trash is born, not made. Moreover, it is perceived in eugenics as a social condition that is inherited; the genetic makeup of white trash concludes that class (‘trash’) is innate and potentially genetic, rather than something that is marked or inscribed on the subject. If whiteness is marked by trash, then trash must be exterior to identity, and not innate. Class marks the subject, in much the same way that race, gender and sexuality are the building blocks of identity.

But when someone is named white trash, only race and class is evoked. Newitz and Wray have also argued that the stereotype of white trash “calls our attention to the way that discourses of class and racial difference tend to bleed into one another, especially in the way that they pathologize and lay waste to their ‘others’” (1997b: 169). They do indeed bleed into one another, but it is class, rather than racial difference that is used as a weapon to dismiss non-privileged whites. In other words, if class difference was not an embarrassing social problem for dominant white culture, the whiteness of white trash would remain unquestioned, unattacked and un-trashed.

As I stated earlier, Gummo depicts white trash within a very degenerate context, and it is for this reason that it may be understood as a film that perceives white trash as a social problem that is inherited, genetic and specific to a
‘damaged’ landscape. For these reasons, it could be argued that Korine produces an essentialist representation of white trash. One of the ways Korine achieves an essential and seemingly authentic model of white trash is in the way he casts non-actors. The people he casts embody white trashiness—so much so that they do not need to perform as white trash. They are white trash. Korine states that “[Non-actors] can give you what an actor can never give you: pieces of themselves” (Kelley). An example of Korine’s unique approach to casting white trash is the way he cast the role of Tummler. After seeing Nick Sutton appear on the Sally Jesse Raphael show, in an episode called “My Child Died From Sniffing Paint”, Korine was determined to cast him as Tummler. It is no coincidence that Tummler’s character is particularly obsessed with sniffing glue, which serves to blur the line between what is ‘real’ and what is ‘performed’ in the film. Even the few professional actors used in Gummo—Linda Manz, Chloë Sevigny and Max Perlich—seem to fulfil a particular sense of white trash authenticity because these actors are often (though not always) type-cast as white trash characters. For example, Linda Manz (Figure 2.1) is best known for her childhood portrayals of poor white trash in Days of Heaven (Terrence Malick, 1978), The Wanderers (Philip Kaufman, 1979) and Out of the Blue (Dennis Hopper, 1980). By casting Manz as a white trash mother, Korine is paying homage to an actor whose early career was noted for such roles.

Among the rest of the players in Gummo are a retarded girl with a penchant for shaving her eyebrows, a young Downs Syndrome prostitute, an albino girl, and a young boy with Attention Deficit Disorder. It appears that their disabilities are indistinct from their white trashiness. Like the eugenic narratives
before them, these characters are not so much ‘disabled’ as outright ‘defective’.

Thankfully, in a climate of political and cultural correctness words like

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 2.1

_Gummo’s_ white trashness is authenticated through the casting of actors like

Linda Manz. In this scene, Manz sits amongst the junky clutter of her house.

‘defective’ are no longer used to describe conditions such as Downs Syndrome.

_Gummo_ does however, represents a white trash milieu through a variety of
disabilities, which suggests that Korine is obsessed with maintaining a stereotype
that middle America is populated by ‘freakish’ white trash. In other words, they
attract a viewer’s attention in much the same way a circus would: because they
are visibly different. Such characters as these represent white trash not simply as
the ‘other’, but rather as a community of people who behave in a strange,
‘immoral’ and ‘anti-social’ manner because they do not know any better. And it
is for this very reason that we can forgive them of their crimes. In keeping with a
eugenic model of white trash, their physical disabilities are conflated with their
anti-social behaviour, which allows a viewer—particularly a privileged white
viewer—to simultaneously accept and reject what they see on screen, because it
is performed by a cast that is radically different from themselves. In other words, a cast of such ‘degenerate’ characters are accepted on screen because they are recognised as poor white trash who do not know any better and can, to an extent, be tolerated. They can also be rejected because they are unconsciously or otherwise situated as the ‘other’. It is because such characters can potentially contaminate the social fabric of normative whiteness that they must be kept at bay.

One of the traps here is to disregard Gummo altogether. I have argued that Gummo reinforces some essentialist white trash stereotypes, inherited from eugenics. But is it possible to suggest that Gummo employs a more careful strategy, rather than one that is simply exploitative? I would have to agree that it does, because while the film sails close to exploiting its subject, I would argue that it is slightly more complex because, in resisting a formal narrative structure, in favour of a faux-documentary style that is enhanced by Jean-Yves Escoffier’s cinematography, this group of characters are represented in rather affectionate terms. The camera lingers on its subject, sometimes with an intimacy and warmth. At times, the film is punctuated with still life Polaroid portraits, freezing various characters momentarily, in an attempt to fetishise their strange beauty (see Figure 2.2). Perhaps it is because Korine represents such a grotesque vision of white trash in such a beautifully photographed way that one cannot help but enter into a kind of dialogue with the film. The film’s abject subject matter may feel so far removed from normative white culture, but also very much a part of it in the way it makes reference to a variety of sources ranging
from popular to high brow film cultures, in a way that is unmistakable. If *Gummo* had been filmed in a more grungy, ‘independent’ style—one more in keeping with its modest budget—it would lose all accessibility for a wider audience, and perhaps even limit its distribution.\(^5\)

![Figure 2.2](image_url)

The characters of *Gummo* are often represented through Polaroids. Glue-sniffing Tummler is captured here, his eyes closed, suggesting a disaffected, drug-induced state.

I have used the word ‘grungy’ quite deliberately because it immediately evokes a kind of style that is often attributed, among other things, to a white trash aesthetic. In simplistic terms, grunge refers to dirt, and that which is abject. While it may not resort to a consistently grungy style, *Gummo* represents white

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4 According to filmmaker Gus Van Sant, *Gummo* is unlike any other film because it cannot be easily categorised. However, Van Sant follows by stating that “there are so many influences running through *Gummo*; Herzog, Cassavetes, Arbus, Fellini, Godard, Maysles, Jarman – that a chainsaw couldn’t cut it” (*Gummo* Official Web Site, www.finelinefeatures.com/gummo). To an extent, Van Sant’s comments support my argument that *Gummo* depends on the very culture of which it resists being linked.

5 *Gummo* was produced with a low budget of USD $1 million. These funds were provided by Fine Line Features, a division of well-heeled American studio New Line Cinema. As an off-shoot, Fine Line prides itself on producing quality independent features, while the parent company New Line produces the more expensive blockbuster fodder. Because of their emphasis on ‘quality’ (ie. well-financed) independent films, companies like Fine Line have become known as mini-majors in the U.S. market place.
trash as abject, in a way that recalls Kristeva’s often-quoted essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*. According to Kristeva, the abject is “radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses” (1982: 1-2). Abjection disrupts the rules of identity and is so ambiguous and undifferentiated that it exists on the border of identity. Abjection is both the biological and symbolic waste of the body; abjection is that which must be excluded in order for identity to function coherently. However, as Elizabeth Gross notes, “that what must be expelled from the subject’s corporeal functioning can never be fully obliterated but hovers at the border of the subject’s identity, threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and possible dissolution” (1990: 87).

The abject is located on the border of certain binaries, of which the body and identity depends. The first of these binaries is inside/outside. Bodily fluids such as spit, shit, urine and blood threaten to disrupt the self-contained unity of that which inside and that which is out, because the body expels such fluids so that it may be rejuvenated. The abject exists on the border between a second binary: dead/alive. The most obvious example of this is the corpse, which for Kristeva, is the ultimate in abjection: it signifies a body without a soul, a body that has literally become waste. A third binary is autonomous/engulping, and examples of this binary in action would include the ravages of disease, infection and pollution.

I have outlined this very brief definition of abjection in order to consider the ways in which white trash is frequently conceptualised as abject and wasteful. Certainly, the eugenic model of white trash would conceive that white trash is *essentially* abject. The term white trash itself suggests a form of whiteness that is identified by the way it has been marked as trash. Cultural critic Chuck
Jackson argues that the "modernist anxiety about the white body ... produces the spectre of white trash precisely because bourgeois whites might not be able to figure intra-racial differences as anything other than, yet not quite palpable abjection" (2000: 644). If this is so, then the differences that divide rich whites from poor whites have shifted away from class categories (rich/poor) and into something that is much more about moral worth: good/evil or clean/abject. Arguably, such moral imperatives could be conceived as a hangover from eugenics because of the way eugenics loaded genetic code with social value.

In Gummo, abjection is signified in a number of ways, all of which could be read in Kristeva’s terms. In Gummo, abjection is signified through dirt, a substance that is both of the body, and external to it. For the detached viewer, dirt exists in Gummo as the ultimate in social disorder. For the inhabitants of Xenia, this dirt may be the exact opposite: perhaps it is the ultimate in order. Houses are cluttered with trash; Solomon eats his dinner while bathing in dirty water (Figure 2.3); two children play in a junkyard; one house is riddled with bugs; a young girl plays in mud. Xenia is a dirty place. As I stated before, Xenia is a place still (psychologically) damaged by a long-gone tornado. In one of the film’s most uncomfortable moments, Soloman and Tummler break into someone’s house and encounter an old woman in bed. Apart from being unclean,

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6 In her groundbreaking anthropological study Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas argues that “dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder... Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment (1966: 2). Douglas’ definition of dirt operates within a context that works towards understanding the differences between the way ‘primitive’ and modern cultures view pollution and taboo. Dirt appears to offend, but its elimination is considered a positive thing, an attempt to assemble order. (Assuming for a moment, that one wants to clean up their mess.) Certainly, the sterile existence of Carol White from Safe (see Chapter 1), would suggest that dirt is something that must be avoided and feared at all costs.
the old woman "smells bad" and is being kept alive by a life support machine. Tummler decides to turn off the machine because, as he says to Soloman, she is "dead already". This scene obviously raises serious ethical questions, that would be a sidetrack at this point. The old woman does, however, represent the ultimate in abjection. She exists at the border between life and death. She may be breathing but she is a corpse: "the most sickening of wastes ... a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva, 3). As a corpse, this woman is perceived by Tummler as no longer human; she is not only dirty, she is dirt. The fact that she also smells suggests that she has "gone off", long since expired. While the filth of Xenia, and its inhabitants, establish a context for abjection, I would argue that white trash identity is represented as abject in a way that is not unlike eugenic theories that position white trash as both genetically and socially inferior.

![Figure 2.3](image)

Solomon eats his dinner in a dirty bath. Taped to the wall is a piece of bacon. "Seriously," says Korine of this scene, "all I want to see is pieces of fried bacon taped on walls, because most films don't do that" (Herzog, 1997: online). On The Late Show with David Letterman (Oct 17, 1997), Korine said, "Bacon is my aesthetic, essentially".
There are countless other scenes that could be useful for a discussion of dirt. I have limited the following discussion to two examples. The scenes I have selected are not necessarily the dirtiest of the film, or even the most abject in their ability to shock, but rather they illustrate one of the ways that white trash is regarded as abject in terms of sexual identity. In my first example, a young nameless girl plays in mud (Figure 2.4). A voiceover, which we can only assume is the voice of this girl, describes how she was sexually abused by her father. The mud she plays in, like most forms of dirt represented in the film, becomes a symbol for the kinds of social problems, like incest and sexual abuse, that exist in Gummo. The girl plays by herself, and why she actually plays in the mud remains a mystery. But an overwhelming sense of alienation and loneliness is suggested, and is further emphasised by her disembodied voiceover.

![Figure 2.4](image)

A nameless young girl plays in the mud. She was molested by her father.

The aforementioned scene is brief, and occurs early in Gummo. The young girl does not appear in the film again. It would be impossible to assume too
much based on the scene, only because it would be difficult to argue firstly that it
establishes a framework where abjection is linked to a notion of white trash, and
secondly, that white trash is simultaneously coded in genetic and social terms.
This scene does, however, establish the tone of abuse that lingers throughout
*Gummo*. In the context of eugenics such forms of abuse are viewed as typical
white trash behaviour because, bizarre as it sounds now, abuse would have been
perceived as inherited and genetic.

The three sisters Dot, Helen and Darby feature more frequently in the film
than the young nameless mud dweller. Dot and Helen in particular are almost
archetypal in their youthful representation of poor white trash. Both are teenage
girls who are quite outspoken about their curiosity with sex. They dress in
skimpy, garish clothes that attract attention, and in one scene they apply duct
tape to their nipples so they will appear to be erect (Figure 2.5 and 2.6). The
costumes used in *Gummo* are, for the most part, archetypal white trash fashions
because they are dated and often grotesque. In some instances the clothes could
have been purchased from a thrift store, in others they could have been passed
down when the original owner had outgrown them. Interestingly, actor Chloë
Sevigny was also the costume designer for *Gummo*, and the fact that someone
was employed to execute a specific style, suggests that a white trash ‘style’ or
‘look’ had to be cultivated with care.\(^7\) As Sevigny plays Dot, the eldest of the
three sisters, we can assume that the girls’ costumes were indeed part of

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\(^7\) Like Linda Manz, Chloë Sevigny is an actor often typecast as white trash. Sevigny
plays white trash characters in *Boys Don’t Cry* (see Chapter 4), *Kids* (Larry Clark, 1995)
*Trees Lounge* (Steve Buscemi, 1996), and Harmony Korine’s second feature, *Julien Donkey-
Boy* (1999). Sevigny also appears in *American Psycho* as Bateman’s mousy secretary,
though this character is not identifiably white trash.
Sevigny's job as costume designer. If this is so, it is arguable that the 'trashy' aesthetic achieved was a deliberate construction, and one that emphasises the sexuality of the girls.

Figure 2.5
Dot and Helen apply duct tape to their nipples, so they will be erect when the tape is removed. Behind them is Darby, their youngest sister.

Figure 2.6
Dot (who is still wearing the duct tape) directly addresses the camera through a series of seductive poses.

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8 According to the Official Web Site for Gummo, Sevigny's "awareness of youth culture and fashion helped the film achieve its rich, realistic look. To capture the film's intended textures, she spent hours combing Nashville's thrift stores and made whatever clothes she couldn't find" (Gummo Official Web Site, www.finelinefeatures.com/gummo).
The sisters share a cluttered, untidy house, and care for each other and their pet cat. Unsurprisingly we never see their parents. It is perhaps because of this that Dot exudes an air of parental authority and care. Of all the characters in the film, Dot and Helen are probably the cleanest in appearance. They care about how they look primarily because they want to attract boys. Unlike other characters in *Gummo*, the girls are not marked as 'trash' through dirt. Rather it is the way they are dressed, coupled with their preoccupation with sex that marks them as trash. When their cat goes missing the three girls attempt to find their pet by distributing pamphlets throughout Xenia. One man picks up the girls by falsely claiming he knows of their cat’s whereabouts. It is when they are in the car with him that he starts to make sexual advances towards Helen, which are forcefully rejected by the girls. As they escape his car he chants “Nothing new for trash like you”, which confirms that the girls exude a sexual personae that makes them appear ‘cheap’ and ‘easy’. If these girls are to perform as archetypal white trash it goes without saying that they would then be expected to be sexually available because it is “nothing new” for them.

I would argue that the representation of the girls’ sexual identity is indistinct from their white trashness. They have been constructed by Korine as white trash, not only because they exist in Xenia, or because their class is less-than privileged. Rather, their confident adolescent sexuality renders them as white trash. Because most of the characters in the film are engaged in (or otherwise exposed to) non-normative sexual behaviour, it is much more conceivable that their status as white trash would be assured. Just as eugenics maps the proliferation of social problems onto specific genetic types, the characters of *Gummo* conform to a white trash identity because they behave in a
way that has perhaps been learned from the grown-ups, or behave in reaction to their absence. It is in their parents' absence that they are pushed into an early independence that seems strange and unfitting.

I have momentarily digressed from an obvious account of how dirt or abjection functions in *Gummo*, primarily because these scenes imply that the waste and wastefulness of these subjects derives from their status as *white trash-in-progress*. They have begun to approximate the conditions, attitudes or stereotypes of white trash living, but as children and teenagers, are they fully responsible for their actions? It is this tension that creates one of the most striking instances where white trash is linked to abjection. Because most of the key characters in *Gummo* are children and teenagers, a tenuous border between infancy and adulthood is established whereby identity is not fully formed, but is somehow acting as if it is. Kristeva defines abjection as waste, as that which is excluded. Identity can only function with any real sense of coherence if the abject elements of the body are excluded. Abjection exists at the border between things, and in *Gummo*, it is that undifferentiated and potentially traumatic period of adolescence that is represented as the most extreme border where abjection can flourish. For Korine, adolescence is a no man's land—the difficult border between childhood and adulthood. It comes as no surprise then that white trash should be problematised within such an obvious border, where identity is perceived to be unformed and in great flux. The link between childhood and abjection will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

White trash itself is almost always represented in film and popular culture as that which is excluded from normative white culture. White trash is abject and must be expelled if the larger social body is to function effectively. It is such
cultural stereotypes as these that cannot help but position white trash as criminal and deviant. It is only when the actual mechanics of these stereotypes are placed under the microscope in relation to eugenics, that this limited framework of white trash identity becomes visible and can then be undermined. If *Gummo* acts as a blue print for a theory of white trash that traverses the difficult terrains of eugenics, essentialism and abjection, it will be the analysis of the films that follow—*Lawn Dogs* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—that will attempt to unearth other ways that white trash may be perceived.

**Sexing White Trash: Abjection, Performativity and Lawn Dogs**

*Lawn Dogs* tells the story of the unlikely friendship between Devon, a misunderstood ten-year-old girl from an affluent white family, and Trent, a white trash loner who is self-employed as a “lawn dog”: a mower of rich folks’ lawns. Devon (Mischa Barton) and her parents live in the newly developed gated community of Camelot Gardens in Louisville, Kentucky. Trent (Sam Rockwell) lives in an abandoned trailer in the woods, working towards the dream of saving enough money to leave behind the poverty signified by his home. The narrative revolves around the way this small Louisville, Kentucky community relate to one another through a very regulated understanding of class and race. Privileged whites in this community always appear obsessed with their social status, meaning they only associate with individuals whose social standing is similar if not identical. In racial terms, whiteness is the only (non-) colour represented in this community. Class difference, then, becomes the means of determining social
worth or worthlessness among white people. As a result, poor whites are isolated to the margins of society, and can only be granted access into this gated community if some menial function such as mowing lawns can be performed.

*Lawn Dogs* appears to make a comment on the way cultural stereotypes construct white trash identity as criminal, abusive and defective, a key concern in my analysis of *Gummo*. In *Lawn Dogs*, the friendship between Devon and Trent is used to explode the assumption that the white trash figure is a criminal or outlaw who will bring harm. Instead, the rich Louisville community are represented as intolerant and preoccupied with the surface value of their everyday lives. I will develop this thread in relation to *Lawn Dogs*, because as I will argue, the two distinct groups in the film—the rich and the poor—simultaneously function as abject.

In my analysis of *Gummo*, I introduced Kristeva’s notion of abjection as a framework for which we might conceptualise white trash. In *Gummo*, abjection is evoked through the imagery of dirt and pollution in the actual landscape of Xenia, and through scenes where its various subjects expel bodily waste or terminate what they regard as waste (such as the slaughter of stray cats and the assisted death of the elderly woman). In *Lawn Dogs*, abjection is signified through the simultaneous repulsion and desire for the other. Feminist cultural critic Iris Marion Young has argued that Kristeva’s notion of abjection allows a way of understanding behaviour of certain groups that seek to exclude the ‘other’ based on fear and loathing. Young writes:

Abjection is the feeling of loathing and disgust the subject has in encountering certain matter, images, and fantasies—the horrible, to which it can only respond
with aversion, with nausea and distraction. The abject is at the same time fascinating; it draws the subject in order to repel it (1990: 143).

In *Lawn Dogs* fear is expressed towards that which its community marks as trash. As I argued in relation to *Gummo*, the eugenics-based definition of white trash as degenerate, defective and abject reinforces white trash stereotypes in the public imagination. As a white trash character, Trent should be marked as abject. What does comes as a surprise is the way the film also represents the upper-class community as abject. Devon quite literally embodies some of Kristeva’s theories to do with abjection and the way identity can be produced through a splitting from the maternal figure. Trent, the character marked as white trash, is abject in the eyes of the wealthy community of Camelot Gardens, but as I already stated, he is a spectacle of desire: Trent’s character illustrates the way in which abjection is ambiguous in that it is both feared and desired, a site of both loathing and lust.

I have selected *Lawn Dogs* as a case study because it illustrates the way that white trash can invoke both racism and classism. Trent and Devon’s relationship is one differentiated by class as well as age. Devon, it seems, does not understand why Trent is perceived as trash by her family and community. “Trash is something you put a lid on because it stinks,” Devon remarks to Trent. After pausing briefly to consider her words, she adds, “You don’t smell bad”. Devon’s world view is that of a child’s: reductive, innocent and keenly observant. Devon realises that Trent has been ‘trashed’ by her community, and reduced to the category of ‘hired help’, yet her simple declaration also acknowledges that Trent doesn’t “smell bad”. Quite the contrary: for Devon, Trent is magnetic, compelling and honest. For some of the older rich women of
Camelot Gardens, Trent’s “trailer man” image makes him both an outcast and a spectacle of sexual desire. Trent represents a paradox where racism and classism can be produced through the repression of desire. Trent is an outcast, not simply because he is what they fear, rather, it is their desire for him that scares them most of all. By living in a natural setting of the woods where mown lawns do not exist, Trent is coded as uncultivated, primal and erotic for the women of the overly manicured, socially produced world of Camelot Gardens. Figure 2.7 and 2.8 illustrates the stark contrast between both worlds.

Earlier in this chapter, I briefly described abjection within Kristeva’s terms, as the biological and symbolic waste of the body, expelled so that the subject may function with coherence. For Kristeva, abjection refers generally to that which is “ambiguous”, that which the subject must “expel” or cast aside in order to exist. The subject must abject itself in order to be produced as an autonomous subject. What concerns me at this juncture is how certain marginal groups or identities become marked as abject because of a fear or loathing that their privileged counterparts express towards them. It seems that the privileged subject produces the marginalised ‘other’ as abject. The subject does not always need to produce her or himself as abject when others may be able to step in and do it instead. Arguably, the privileged white subject is always already abject, and produces the marginal ‘other’ as abject for fear that their own abjection will become visible. It is the fear that privileged whites might be just as repulsive and “ambiguous” that motivates the need to mark the ‘other’ in these terms.

In *Lawn Dogs*, Devon represents a border between two worlds: her family and her secret friend Trent. Another border represented by Devon is that of
childhood: that developmental, liminal state also embodied by most of *Gummo*’s characters. Ten-year-old Devon is pre-adolescent, not quite a teenager, perhaps

![Figure 2.7](image)

The film’s first scene establishes the overly manicured lawns of Camelot Gardens.

![Figure 2.8](image)

Devon is drawn to Trent’s trailer in the woods.

too old to call a child because of her disarming maturity. Devon exhibits an abiding curiosity in her identity and those around her. In other words, Devon is starting to ask questions, and beginning to form her own unique take on the world. Devon is not like other children of her age group, and finds it hard to
relate to her peers. In one scene Devon states: “I don’t like children, they smell like TV”. A mischievous young boy, whom Devon abhors, is the only other child represented in *Lawn Dogs*. Like Devon, he exists in a fantasy world of his own design, in that he is always wearing fancy dress costumes and left to play by himself. More importantly, the young boy is used to emphasise Devon’s maturity, and the in-between character of her identity. It is because she cannot relate to the other children in her community, that she begins to look elsewhere for friendship.

While it is true that Devon does not relate to her own peers, there is evidence to suggest that she does reject what her own parents represent. Devon appears to love and respect her parents, but she does exhibit signs of increasing autonomy. Early in *Lawn Dogs*, Devon is represented as intimately connected to her parents. But in one scene Devon literally separates herself from her parents, when she spits out her food at the family table. Beforehand, Devon had attempted to tell her parents of a serious incident where she had nearly been molested by a family friend. They do not really want to hear of the incident because their own position in the community could be jeopardised. Devon retracts her story claiming she had just been tickled. Devon then spits out her food and is excused from the table.

The act of vomiting—or food loathing, as the case may be for Devon—is one instance where the subject rejects that which it cannot assimilate. Kristeva argues that the act of vomiting is symbolic of an extrication that must occur between the mother and child. To vomit is, quite simply, to “protect” oneself from contamination. Kristeva uses the example of skin on the surface of hot milk to illustrate this point when she writes:
Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an other for me, who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself* (1982: 3).

Vomiting, therefore, is not only a rejection of a loathsome portion of food, it is a rejection of what the food represents. In the case of the child, the food can represent the love of a parent, and through the act of vomiting, the subject emerges anew. As Kristeva evocatively states, "I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (3). After having rejected her food, it comes as no surprise that Devon’s father should state, “she’s just growing up”. Devon is not only growing up, she is demonstrating a marked resistance to her parents, and moreover, to what they represent.

Devon’s parents—Morton and Clare Stockard—are socially ambitious and exist in a world determined by surfaces. Clare (Kathleen Quinlan) is a busy homemaker who is always attending to a garden that is never unmanicured, and house that is never untidy. At certain points in the film, hierarchies are established between household items. For example, the “good glasses” are used when entertaining, but Clare insists that an old glass, situated under the kitchen sink, be used when offering water to the hired help. Clare and Morton are preoccupied with the ritual and performance of class. In one sequence, Devon’s parents host a barbeque lunch at their home where many of their neighbours are in attendance. After having mown their lawn Trent approaches Morton.
(Christopher McDonald) for his payment. Morton humiliates Trent in front of his family and their affluent friends by deliberately short-changing him. This act highlights their class differences and demonstrates the way Morton self-consciously performs his class identity. It appears that Devon’s parents fear they will be exposed as classless in front of their neighbours which is why they are constantly emphasising their upper-middle-class status to those that exist around them.

For Devon’s parents, the conventions of class are nothing more than a carefully orchestrated performance designed to conceal the unhappiness that lies beneath the surface of their family unit. There is no evidence to suggest that they are happy because beneath the surface of this class performance are marriage problems—Clare and Morton’s conversations are coldly polite, but Clare is having an affair. Clare and Morton are also concerned for Devon’s health because she has had a history of heart problems, which have left her body scarred. The large scar on Devon’s chest disgusts Morton because it is a reminder that she is not like other “normal” young girls in their community. At one point he claims that ten-year-old Devon should undergo cosmetic surgery. The scar lurking behind Devon’s clothes assists in marking her as abject, tainted and visibly different to those around her.

Part of the reason Devon is drawn to Trent is because he too has a scar: a mysterious gun-shot wound. In Figure 2.9, Devon proudly shows Trent her scar. The scar functions in the film’s narrative as a motif that celebrates difference. Implied by this motif is the possibility that some will not find reason to celebrate such visibly ‘ugly’ difference. It is usually those who enact ritual sameness and reject difference that will be exposed as harbouring something entirely more
sinister and grotesque. The fact that Devon should be visibly awkward within her own family and community, and drawn to a white trash world beyond her gated community, suggests that she embodies ambiguity and abjection because of her in-between-ness. As Kristeva writes, abjection refers to “The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 4). Though Devon is only seen interacting with adults, she is still a child who exists in-between the innocence of childhood and the more complicated realm of adulthood.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 2.9
Devon impresses Trent by proudly showing off her scar.

For Kristeva, the abject lies at “the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable” (1982: 18). Trent may be an outsider, but his white trash identity is partially “assimilable” and definitely “thinkable” because it can be imagined within sexual terms, a point to which I will return. For the moment, it is Devon who exists on such “boundaries” because she is an in-between identity. Aside from being represented as being between childhood and young adulthood Devon is also positioned between the overly-cultivated Camelot Gardens and the natural setting of the woods; between innocence and knowingness. Devon’s in-
between-ness is asserted by her failure to conform to her parent’s carefully constructed set of social conventions. This in-between-ness produces Devon as abject, something not in keeping with the way white trashness is usually considered abject. For this reason, it appears that *Lawn Dogs* deliberately attempts to reverse spectatorial expectations with regard to the way its characters are perceived. Even though Trent is positioned as the white trash ‘other’, he is not constructed as overtly abject. The larger community of Camelot Gardens are abject because they lack the sincerity Trent embodies.

If Devon, a child from a relatively comfortable middle-class family, is perceived as abject, what is to be made of Trent’s identity? Trent represents a model of white trashness that is not entirely abject because it is still permitted within rather normative, socially responsible parameters. Trent is an idealised version of white trash. Trent aspires to a “better life”, a modest piece of the American dream where he no longer mows lawns for a living. For example, in one scene he says to Devon: “The way I see it you have people who own lawns and people who mow them, and they are never the same”. Trent can only partially convince himself of this because if the two groups are “never the same”, Trent must imagine that he can transform himself into something other than what he knows he is: white trash. The fact that he is represented as an honest, dependable, hardworking man already suggests Trent could be a kind of white trash ‘noble savage’, who is tolerated primarily because he is not really a threatening presence. On those occasions when individuals in Camelot Gardens question his honesty or intentions, it is more because they have nothing better to do than suspect the ‘outsider’ of damage and harm.
Trent, more specifically, represents an eroticised version of white trashness. The eroticisation (making sexy) of the white trash figure occurs early in the film when Trent stops his vehicle on a bridge, undresses and dives into the river below, knowing that he has attracted a crowd of mostly female spectators (Figure 2.10). While Trent is made sexy by these excited onlookers, it certainly must be said that he encourages the attention, having first made a sexual spectacle of himself. The scene is set by Trent’s public display of nudity for the way the community perceive him in sexual terms. For example, one affluent woman from Camelot Gardens, Pam, regularly visits Trent’s trailer for sex and nothing more. Trent’s appeal also translates in homoerotic terms, when one of the male characters from Camelot Gardens, Sean (Eric Mabius), secretly makes a pass at him. Devon’s attraction to Trent is certainly not a sexualised one, but it is an attraction nonetheless, an attraction to something alluring, forbidden and exciting.

The sexualised appeal of white trash also has to do with the way it is perceived as alluring, forbidden and exciting. But when one is marked as white trash he or she is perceived to be social waste; a point which is at odds with the way white trash can be sexualised. In one scene, Sean makes this link between Trent and waste explicit. While watching Trent working from afar, Sean says to his friend Brett, “What a waste. God he just keeps on mowing ... like it will make a difference in the world”. The expression “what a waste” often refers to the way people are termed waste when they fall short of someone’s expectations. For example, a woman might term an attractive gay male “a waste” because he is gay and, therefore, unavailable. Sean’s comment is specifically referring to class because it implies Trent is “wasting” his time and perhaps his life, because
mowing lawns will never make a social difference. Sean's comment could also be read in sexual terms because this same character had made pass at Trent earlier. Arguably, on a subtextual level Sean is referring to the way it is "a waste" that Trent is white trash because if he wasn't white trash they might be friends.

![Figure 2.10](image)

Trent becomes a spectacle of desire when he dives naked from a bridge to a crowd of excited onlookers.

Abjection is conceptualised as waste because it refers to that which is feared. Kristeva offers a few examples of abjection that do not refer so much to corporeal waste, but rather certain identities that can be figured as social waste:

Abjection ... is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who sells you... (Kristeva, 4).

The privileged community of Camelot Gardens are constructed within these terms. They perceive Trent as abject simply because white trash visibly represents everything that they fear. But if Kristeva's work is applied to this
narrative, the community of Camelot are always already abject because of their "hatred that smiles". This insincere smile is everywhere evident in Camelot Gardens. Early in the film, Morton encourages Devon to always appear happy because "everyone loves a smile". The appearance of happiness is more important to Morton than whether Devon actually is happy. Another example includes the way Trent is regarded with a contempt that is veiled by dutiful politeness. The social intolerance of this upper-middle-class community is represented in *Lawn Dogs* as abject, while Trent is depicted in heroic, noble terms.

The ambiguity and in-between-ness of Camelot Gardens is represented by the gate that surrounds their community. Though the gate boasts a sign of warm welcome, it serves to keep intruders at bay. Trent knows that his welcome within this community is provisional, and he enacts a symbolic form of marking his territory, when on one occasions he soaks one of the recently mown lawns with his own urine. Later in the film he tells Devon that as a child he used to piss in the river because it was his way of marking out his territory: "What you piss in is yours for life". Like a dog, Trent must mark out his territory, and demarcate his identity through the abject. Whether or not he actually believes in this symbolic act is questionable, because it contradicts his claim that a lawn mower is "never the same" as the person who owns a lawn. His dog-like gesture of marking a territory that he can never possess is more akin to the futile act of pissing in the wind.

I have paid more attention to the way in which the representation of white trash is eroticised, but simultaneously positioned in direct contrast to a community whose privilege marks white trash as abject. Their privilege is repeatedly
represented as a ritualised performance, that must be maintained at all times, so that the self and other distinction can be reinforced.

The category of white trash also functions in *Lawn Dogs* as performative. Trent is primarily separated on the grounds of class, meaning his poverty distinguishes him from his privileged neighbours. White trash evokes race when it functions on an explicitly racist level. John Waters (who will be discussed in Chapter 3) recently claimed that: “White trash is the last acceptable racist phrase. It’s like saying nigger without saying it. I’m shocked that people use both but don’t think they’re racist” (Huisman, 1999: 13). White trash is a similar term to nigger because it can be used to insult poor whites and pathologise anyone who may exist outside hegemonic ideas of class and race. As a performative term, white trash can signify a celebrated identity for those who may have once been ridiculed. Through reinvention and resignification white trash becomes a term for an identity that is no longer pathologised. Instead, white trash resists and destabilises the normativity that whiteness has constructed for itself.

‘Queer’ is another term that has been similarly reinvented on a performative level, though of course it works in many other ways (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of queer white trash cinema). Judith Butler has argued that the term queer has gained its power, in recent times, through the forceful repetition of its history of insult. Butler writes that:

... this history [of slander] effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said. What it also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim, the terms through which we insist on politicizing identity and desire, often demand a turn against this constitutive historicity (Butler 1993: 227. Emphasis in original).
What Butler makes clear in her work is that “the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim” acquire their meaning through the repetitive force that was once deployed in an abusive context. This kind of linguistic reinvention is called a “performative action” and it implies two things that occur simultaneously. The first being the utterance, which is the “performative”. The second thing relates to how this utterance is carried out, which is the “action”. Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick frame their concerns around performativity with two simple questions: “When is saying something doing something? And how is saying something doing something?” (1995: 1). If this “something” is the utterance of white trash then these questions could be rephrased as “When is saying ‘white trash’ doing ‘white trash’? And how is saying ‘white trash’ doing ‘white trash’?” “When” and “how” white trash is said or done depends entirely on how it is resignified from insult to identity. The notion of white trash is performative because it is the utterance of a supposed action—this action being the way white trash becomes an identity rather than a pathology.

The resignification of white trash from a history of race and class insult to a contemporary identity category is performative because its history is being referenced, reinvented and, quite possibly, parodied. Those who identify as white trash are claiming access to a term that was once used against them. This is a performative action in the sense that white trash “draws on [its history of insult] and covers [it] over” (Butler 1993: 227). By defining white trash in opposition to what it signifies invalidates its dubious origins.

White trash differs from ‘queer’ or ‘nigger’, because a double-take of class and race is uttered, while ‘queer’ refers (mostly) to sexuality and ‘nigger’ refers
to race. It is for this reason that white trash is a complex identity that must be unpacked in relation to race and class. Furthermore, white trash originates from the U.S., and has a culture and history that continues to develop. Although white trash is used by poor American whites to celebrate and reinforce their race and class identity, it is important to note that as an identity, white trash can be used interchangeably. On the one hand, it can be used by non-white trash folk to signify insult and injury, racism and otherness. On the other, it can be used by white trash folk to signify liberation and agency, coalition and community.

While *Gummo* may illustrate the way white trash can sometimes function in essentialist, innate terms, *Lawn Dogs* offers another way of conceptualising white trash. Instead, white trash identity is constructed as something that reacts against white racism on a performative level. Trent acknowledges his poverty and, even though he dreams of moving away, he never pretends to be what he is not. In one scene he performs as a “hillbilly” for Devon, in an attempt to emphasise their class differences. The terms white trash and hillbilly are similar terms, though hillbilly refers more to the (mostly male) mountain-dweller who “provokes a range of responses, from an odd kind of comfort to a real kind of terror... As a rough-and-ready frontiers-man, he can be made to compliment American men. He can also terrify. Put him in the same woods, but make him repulsively savage, a monster of nature, and he now mirrors an undeniable possibility in American manhood” (Williamson, 1995: 1-2). I will discuss the meanings of the hillbilly later in relation to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Trent’s performance of a hillbilly buys into these tropes described by Williamson, but as a satirical performance, it does not really evoke terror or savagery. Rather, it
underscores the shared sense of respect, humour and honesty that solidifies his friendship with Devon.

It is Trent’s self-effacing humour and acknowledgement that is “piss poor” that illustrates my point that white trash can be a performative action. This scene demonstrates that Trent is aware of the racism directed against poor whites by rich whites. Likewise, he is aware of the way poor whites have been stereotypically constructed as hillbilly “piss-poor retards”, but he performs this stereotype in an attempt to simultaneously maintain and resist the spectacle of white trashness. Trent is aware of his origins and stands proud in the face of white racism. Even though he ultimately wants to have enough money to move on in the world, his character demonstrates integrity, and a resistance to the terror that privileged whiteness, more often than not, instils.

**Authenticating White Trash:**

**Country Music and O Brother, Where Art Thou?**

In varying ways, *Gummo* and *Lawn Dogs* represent white trash as criminal, deviant, untrustworthy and oppressed by the ways in which they are perceived by their elite, privileged white counterparts. The last section of this chapter will continue this discussion, but is concerned primarily with the ways white trash is often depicted on screen through the use of country music. Whether it be through white trash country music narratives or through the use of country music on film soundtracks to signify white trashness, it is undeniable that white trash is often represented as having a special affinity with country music. For this
reason my analysis of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (which hereafter will be referred to as *O Brother*) will underscore the way early forms of U.S. country music are used to emphasise the white trashness of the film’s characters.

Directed by Joel Coen and written by Ethan Coen (see Appendix 2.2), *O Brother* comically recreates the poverty and hardship of Mississippi, 1937: a time influenced by the Depression. Loosely based on Homer’s *The Odyssey*, the film references numerous filmic and literary sources. For example, the film’s title is taken from Preston Sturges’ film *Sullivans Travels* (1941), in which a comic filmmaker plans to make a serious film called *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* but never manages to do so. In the Coen brothers film, Everett Ulysses McGill (George Clooney) is a convict who persuades his chain-gang mates Pete (John Turturro) and Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) to escape in search of hidden treasure. Unbeknownst to Pete and Delmar, Everett’s real motivation for escape is to prevent his wife (Holly Hunter) from remarrying—the treasure does not really exist. Just after their escape, a blind fortune-teller tells them they will “travel a long and difficult road, a road fraught with danger”. The three fugitives certainly encounter a number of life-threatening situations, but they are balanced by bizarrely fortuitous scenarios which ultimately make them unlikely white trash heroes. The main factor that contributes to their heroic status is the song they record as The Soggy Bottom Boys. The song recorded, “Man of Constant Sorrow”, is an “old-timer” country tune, that becomes a runaway hit in Mississippi.

9 The name of their group, The Soggy Bottom Boys, is a name which has a wider connotations in the U.S. because the State Department headquarters in Washington, D.C. is known as Foggy Bottom. Named after an area near the Potomac River which was frequently blanketed by fog, Foggy Bottom is the moniker often applied to the Department of State.
Before I discuss the specific relationship between country music and white trash, as it relates to the narrative action of *O Brother*, I will discuss some of the other themes that orbit around the film’s white trashness. These themes include the way the film represents race relations between white and black Americans, the way whiteness is marked by white trash, the way white trash and criminality is depicted, and the way the road is represented.

The white trashness of the three main characters is consistently emphasised by the film’s cinematography. Roger Deakins’ cinematography is bleached of colour emphasising the hot, arid landscape, as well as the rural setting of poverty and hardship.\(^\text{10}\) The film begins in a softly diffused black and white, depicting a chain-gang of slaves performing hard labour in a desolate, expansive field. A majority of the slaves are African American, and while working they sing a traditional ‘Negro’ spiritual called “Po Lazarus”.

The palette of the next scene changes to colour, in time for the introduction of the film’s three key white characters. Everett, Pete and Delmar are chained together and running through the yellow field, having escaped imprisonment. It appears that they would have been the only white prisoners on the chain-gang from which they have escaped. At first, the identities of the escapees is ambiguous because they are framed in a long-shot that silhouettes their bodies against the bright sky. As they get closer, their identities are still obscured because their faces are dirty. The dirt on their faces signifies their

\(^{10}\) This bleached effect was achieved in post-production by a unique computer process. As reported on the *Internet Movie Database*, “The whole film was graded digitally on computer. The negative was scanned in with a Spirit Dataciné at 2K resolution and then colours were digitally fine-tuned. The process took several weeks. The resulting digital master was output on film again with a Kodak laser recorder to create a print master. It was the first time this had been done for a whole film in Hollywood (but not in other countries)” (*Internet Movie Database*, http://us.imdb.com/Trivia?0190590).
trashness, but often in the course of the film their dirty faces assist in making them appear as if they are African Americans (Figure 2.11). While this may seem ridiculous, the three outlaws are regarded in numerous scenes as racially ambiguous; they are occasionally mistaken as “Negroes” because of their dirty faces. When their record “Man of Constant Sorrow” becomes a hit, no one knows of their real identities which helps propagate the myth that they are black. In this opening sequence, their obscured or ‘darkened’ identities emphasises their criminality. Moreover, the fact that their whiteness is marked so vividly by dirt, underlines the way in which the category of white trash dirties whiteness, rendering it visible. In many ways it is because these characters are prisoners/slaves, that they come to be figured as white trash. As Newitz and Wray note, the term white trash has been said to have emerged in the context of slavery during the early nineteenth century:

Sources attribute the origin of the term [white trash] to black slaves, who used it as a contemptuous reference to white servants. While there is some reason to doubt these accounts, the emergence of white trash within the context of black slavery and white servitude speaks to the racialized roots of the meaning of the term (1997a: 2).

Even though their whiteness is often obscured, it is emphasised on occasion. Delmar’s white face in particular is often pasty, suggesting he is either malnourished or in a state of being physically and spiritually unclean. His pale whiteness is something of a spectacle, which seems at odds with the way it is occasionally obscured (Figure 2.12). In one scene, the three encounter a mass baptism at a river. Delmar is the first to accept baptism as form of salvation, and
by submitting to being dunked in the river, he believes he is redeemed and that his crimes have been washed away. Ironically, Delmar's face continues to appear

Figure 2.11
Pete, Delmar and Everett's dirty faces render them racially ambiguous.

unwashed and pasty throughout the rest of the film. Though he naively believes otherwise, Delmar can never be really physically or spiritually clean because he is white trash. Delmar never appears to be anything but a dirty white person. As stated earlier, the dirty whiteness of the three main characters occasionally effects a certain racial ambiguity. But this mistake is only made by other white

118
characters in the film. A few of these characters are blind so it would appear an easy mistake to make. But this is not the case with the black folk they meet along the way. They encounter an African American hitchhiker called Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King), who explains how he sold his soul to the devil in exchange for guitar-playing prowess. "I wasn’t using it", says Tommy of his soul. When asked about the specifics of the devil’s appearance, Tommy says, “the devil is white, as white as you folks”. Tommy is the only character to acknowledge their whiteness in such direct terms.

Later in the film it is revealed that the white devil alludes to the Ku Klux Klan.11 In this scene, which sees the Klansmen perform a comically choreographed dance that references a musical interlude from The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939), the head Klansman states that the “dilution” of whiteness by the assimilation of colour is to be feared at all costs. Their secret ceremony is interrupted by Everett, Pete and Delmar, the three white trash criminals, who succeed in saving Tommy from being killed by hanging. The Klansmen assume these impostors are black because again their faces are dirty (Figure 2.13). As white trash, Everett, Pete and Delmar are positioned in direct contrast to the self-appointed privilege of the Ku Klux Klan. While the Ku Klux Klan represent an ignorant, ‘redneck’ set of values more in keeping with the way Southern white trash has been historically perceived, they are represented in the film as members of Mississippi’s respected, middle-class set.

The well-worn relationship between white trash and criminality is evident in O Brother, as it is in other films examined in this dissertation. In Gummo, many

11 The Ku Klux Klan was a secret society founded at Atlanta, Georgia in 1915. The white hooded, anonymous Klansmen were white supremacists who were (often violently) opposed to the ascendency of African Americans (or ‘Negroes’).
of the white trash kids were so morally bankrupt that their petty crimes or bad
behaviour seems justified by the atmosphere of parental neglect. Many of the
affluent community of Lawn Dogs immediately assume that white trash figure
will bring harm. When Trent kills a dog, he has committed a crime in the eyes of
this community. Likewise, the films of John Waters discussed in Chapter 3
regularly equate white trash with crime. O Brother represents its white trash
criminals as relatively harmless, naïve and even heroic by the film’s end. Their
crimes are petty, and capable of being “washed away” either by Baptism or by
the law, because after they are revealed as the Soggy Bottom Boys, they are
granted a pardon by the state of Mississippi.

![Figure 2.13](image)

Posing as a Klansman, Everett (George Clooney)
is mistaken as black because of his dirty face.

Later, in Chapter 4, I argue that the road is a key location for the
emergence of white trashness. Even though this is discussed in the context of
New Queer Cinema, the road functions similarly in O Brother. During the day,
their road trip which is mostly done on foot is oppressive and difficult due to the
hot, expansive and endless landscape. The road functions as a place of refuge, because they are on the run from the law. It is on the road that they encounter many of the film's oddball characters. But most of these characters are not really white trash. Instead, they are political figures, African Americans or travelling Bible-salesmen. They encounter another criminal, a suit-wearing bank robber called George 'Babyface' Nelson (Michael Badalucco). This character is not represented as white trash: he does not rob banks for financial gain, but rather to cement his status as a notorious criminal. Babyface Nelson doesn't seem to require the money, evidenced by the way he gives it away during moments of manic depression.

In much of my research on white trash cinema, I have been struck by the recurring use of music to anchor the cultural meanings often associated with white trash. In *Pleasantville*, 1950's rock and roll is referred to as 'coloured music' (see Chapter 1). However, the flipside of rock and roll as 'coloured' music is that it was also considered white trash music. In his essay "Aural Celluloid", Jack Sargeant outlines the influence of white trash and rock music on underground filmmakers, such as Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, Richard Kern and John Waters. Sargeant lists Waters' *Pink Flamingos* as a "rock and roll movie...[that] essentially presented the rebellious lifestyle as the definitive lifestyle (1999: 29). Waters himself is more specific than Sargeant when he states that the music used is "filth music". In the liner notes to the *Pink Flamingos* soundtrack Waters writes: "It's definitely a pre-punk sound; aggressively shabby, technically primitive, and always sexually ironic... Sometimes a song you remember from your youth is so square and sappy that you can turn it into 'filth' music by simply imagining
joyously obscene images in your head to go along with the sugar-coated lyrics” (Universal Music, 1997). Waters’ film *Hairspray* (1988) is a narrative of racial conflict in 1950s Baltimore that was offset by the way rock music was embraced by the white kids, much to the resistance of their parents and the larger community. In *Hairspray*, rock music elicits the uncanny ability to resolve racial tension, bringing white and black kids together, much in the same way it does in *Pleasantville*.

*O Brother* utilises music to similar thematic effect as *Pleasantville* or *Hairspray*, except in this case, the music used covers a range of music styles that are early twentieth century precursors for American country music. The soundtrack’s producer T Bone Burnett attempts to define the style of music when he says it “is pre-bluegrass music, pre-country, traditional American music. I don’t know what its called, really — American heritage music, folk, old-time stuff” (cited in Skanse, 2000: online). Because the various types of music to which Burnett refers are now often bracketed within the all-encompassing genre of country, they will hereafter be referred to as country music. In dialogue from *O Brother*, the popular music of the time (the late 1930s) is specifically referred to as “old-timer” music. According to country music historian, Richard Peterson, “old-timer music” was a term first used in 1923. In the early 1920s, old-timer

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12 In 2002, *Hairspray* was turned into a Broadway musical that incorporated some of the music originally used in the film, along with new songs written specifically for the stage show. Starring Harvey Fierstein in the role originally played by Divine and Marissa Jaret Winokurset in the role originally played by Ricki Lake, *Hairspray* premiered at Broadway’s Neil Simon Theatre on August 15, 2002.

13 T Bone Burnett also provided nostalgic white trash music for the Coen brothers’ earlier white trash movie *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Burnett is credited on *The Big Lebowski* as “Music Archivist”.

122
music was synonymous with the appellation "hillbilly music", because the more widespread category of country music was not used until the 1940s.

By describing this style of music as "old-timer", the relationship between white trash and the actual music is not immediately obvious, but when described as "hillbilly music", the associations with Southern poor white trash abound. Film historian J.W. Williamson has traced the term hillbilly back to 1900, when it first appeared in the *New York Journal*. According to this publication,

A Hill-Billie is a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he can get it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him (cited in Williamson, 1995: 37).

Of note in this definition is the way the hillbilly is racialised as a "white citizen". As an unemployed male mountain-dweller, a hillbilly came to be associated with fear and revulsion, because of their investment in hard liquor and guns. This stereotype is certainly evident in *O Brother*, especially when Pete visits his cousin for refuge after having escaped the prison farm. This character, called Washington Hogwallop, is an unemployed, hard-drinking, toothless, gun-toting hillbilly who ultimately betrays Pete to the authorities to cash in on reward money posted for their capture.

Peterson cites another, much later definition of hillbilly used in the popular press, except this time the description of hillbilly is meant to aid an understanding of the 1920's phenomenon of "hillbilly music". The article in question, "Hill-Billy Music" was from *Variety* (December 26, 1926):
The hillbilly is a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the Chautauqua, and the phonograph... The mountaineer is of 'poor white trash' genera. The great majority, probably 95 percent, can neither read nor write English. Theirs is a community all to themselves. [They are] illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons (cited in Peterson, 7-8).

While the New York Journal definition made no attempt to veil the social inadequacy of the hillbilly, the one provided in Variety, some 26 years later, takes the hillbilly to task for its outright moronic existence. Moreover, the hillbilly is a positioned here as an off-shoot of the more widely used term white trash. Even though this definition was used to contextualise old-timer music, the only real link between the hillbilly and such music is the apparent "allegiance" the hillbilly has to the "phonograph". Implied by this statement is that the phonograph is a frivolous, recreational investment that plays too large a part in the lives of hillbilly or white trash communities.

While this unkind description of the hillbilly is to a degree in keeping with contemporary understandings of the term, it neglects the fact that the hillbilly image in country music was only an image. Peterson argues that hillbilly or old-time music attempted to construct the authenticity of the rural, mountain dweller through the specific look used for live stage performances. Peterson writes that this hillbilly image had to "be seen as authentic, had to fit the image implied in the music, in the lyrics, and most important, in the expectations of audiences" (55). Because the specific look was fabricated, it meant that many of these musicians did not necessarily have to be hillbillies to be seen as authentic. In the film, the staged musical performances are performed by contemporary country
artists such as The Whites, an addition that serves to authenticate the film’s country-ness to a knowing audience. Authenticity is also constructed on the O Brother soundtrack through its integration of original music from the 1920s and 30s with updated versions of such material by well-known contemporary country artists Emmylou Harris, Alison Krauss and Gillian Welch. Of these artists only Welch makes a (non-musical) appearance in the film.

In the early days of country music, the notion of hillbilly authenticity was imagined and illusory because a hillbilly performance could be enacted by anybody with musical talent. It thus remains questionable as to whether or not these musical performers were in fact white trash. As Peterson writes:

the rural status system of the 1920s bears little relation to our contemporary class system. Many who by modern standards might be considered impoverished were then considered relatively well off. Such people fit into the class of ‘respectable God-fearing poor’, and socially they were a clear notch above the ‘poor white trash’ that provided the model for the hillbilly stereotype (74-75).

As O Brother is set during the Depression of the 1930s, many of its characters are without question poor white trash. Country music is a popular form of entertainment because it is inexpensive activity that passes the time. Its popularity with the people is noted by two of the film’s political characters, who use country tunes to accompany their campaigns. Both candidates for governor, Pappy O’Daniel (Charles Durning) and Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall) design relentless campaigns to help their chances of being elected governor. Pappy uses the song “You are My Sunshine”, and Homer’s campaign tune is the similarly-themed “Keep on the Sunny Side”. The naïve optimism of both songs is
performed for both candidates by local hillbillies, perhaps because the performance is perceived as more authentic. Furthermore, by incorporating the ‘common’ town folk, their campaigns stand a greater chance of appealing to the rural, unsophisticated poor white majority of voters. Political campaigning is also woven through the narrative of another film about country music: Nashville (Robert Altman, 1975). In this film, Altman similarly represents a strong relationship between country music and white trash, though it is set in a much later time frame (mid 1970s) when country music was an established, popular musical institution.

The institutionalisation of country music (in its various incarnations) has only just recently crossed over into the area of cultural studies. Barbara Ching is one of the few cultural critics to outline this history, and to specifically point out its relationship to white trash. In an essay from Wray and Newitz’s anthology of essays, White Trash, Ching writes that country music is the chosen music of “unsophisticated” white people:

Sociological research indicates that country music plays in the space of white Americans who are on the whole less educated and hold low status jobs. Although relatively privileged by virtue of its white skin, this is a population that lacks, again in Bourdieu’s terminology, “cultural capital,” a lack announced in a range of labels from the somewhat romanticized yet rustic “cowboy” to the more pejorative “bumpkin,” “cracker,” “hayseed,” “hick,” “hillbilly,” “redneck,” “rube,” “simple folk,” “yokel,” and the name that includes most of the above, and strips away the euphemistic raiillery of those other names: “white trash” (1997: 232-33).
Later in her essay, Ching argues that country music “refuses, except as camp, to be an expression of other people’s unacculturation and unsophistication” (242). Ching notes how country music is often linked to camp as much as it is to white trash. In other words, some enjoy country for reasons of (unsophisticated or unaccultured) taste, others enjoy what is perceived as its campy excess. Whatever the reasons for its consumption or rejection, it almost goes without saying that country music is often inflected with themes of death, betrayal and unrequited desire, that often run against the grain of particular narratives of love and desire, often expressed in mainstream pop and rock music. It seems that the melancholy often evoked in country music is balanced by a performance of identity that is often perceived as “camp”. Meaning, it is easy to be dismissive of country music and not to take it seriously, because as a camp performance of identity, it is already seen as something of a joke, whereby its often melancholy sentiments are brushed aside by the often caricatured styles of country performers: big hair, cowboy garb and so on. As Ching has written, “country music is capable of performing a rural role in such a way as to underline its construction and social purpose rather than its presumed natural essence, innocence, and/or bad taste” (233).

Although this claim alludes to the performativity of country music’s seemingly ‘authentic’ performances, country continues to be one of the most debased forms of popular music. The constructedness of identity is certainly emphasised by the performance of country music, because as Peterson had noted, a particular white trash image must be fabricated in order for it to be regarded as authentic. But the close affiliation of country music with the “unsophisticated” working classes in terms of both its production and
consumption has ensured country music its own cultural and geographic ghetto. The performance of country music may be perceived as 'performative' for cultural commentators equipped with the language to understand or even care for such a term, but for many, country music represents nothing more than an embarrassing exercise in 'bad taste' because it reinforces stereotypes about hillbillies, hicks, rednecks and white trash. If identity is so constructed in the performance of country music, why would white trash want to remain engaged in an ongoing parody of themselves?

Whether or not country music is in fact bad taste or deserves its debased status with so-called sophisticated consumers is of little concern at this juncture. Rather, I am interested in underscoring the way country music comes to be so closely aligned with white trash on the big screen. It is even the case on the small screen. For example, in one episode of “The Simpsons” (“Colonel Homer”, 1992), Homer discovers and starts managing country singing waitress Lurleen Lumpkin whose repertoire includes self-penned songs called “Your Wife Don’t Understand You But I Do” and “Stand By Your Manager”. The popularity of country music in this episode helps establish a distinction between low culture town of Springfield and the even lower location where Lurleen lives: Spittle County. In addition to this, this narrative satirises the way white trash has come to be associated with particular stereotypes to do with country music, yokel-humour, redneck bars, and tornado-prone trailer parks. Various filmic references are added which include the banjo-playing hillbilly from Deliverance (John Boorman, 1972) and the film based on Loretta Lyn’s life Coal Miner’s Daughter (Michael Apted, 1980). The fact that Lurleen is voiced by Beverly D’Angelo, who
co-starred with Sissy Spacek in Coal Miner's Daughter adds weight to this already richly referenced narrative.\textsuperscript{14}

A satirical view of country music and its consumers is produced through the inclusion of these filmic references in “The Simpsons”. As satire, these references challenge the way country music constructs authenticity because as Peterson argues, authenticity is fabricated “to highlight the fact that authenticity is not inherent in the object … but is a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered” (5). In the case of “The Simpsons” or even O Brother, we might substitute “misremembered” for “lampooned”.

Whatever the case, the past is misremembered because the spur-clad boot of country music is usually pointed in the direction of a distinctly nostalgic past. Early forms of country resisted modernity, industrialisation and progress because “those attracted to the music were responding to representations of an unchanged past” (Peterson, 7).\textsuperscript{15}

In O Brother, the desire to maintain one’s roots in the past is constantly stated by the phenomenal popularity of old-timer music—songs that represent the old times before the depression.\textsuperscript{16} Pete and Delmar dream about transcending

\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, an episode of “The Simpsons” from 1991 is called “Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?” Predating the Coen brothers’ film by nine years, this episode pays homage to the original source of this phrase: Preston Sturges’ film Sullivans Travels.

\textsuperscript{15} This attempt to hold on to an unchanged past parallels the way the modern city was depicted in the early twentieth century popular press as characterised by hyperstimulus because of its ability to elicit nervous shocks and jolts in the unsuspecting individual. Cultural historian, Ben Singer writes, “The portrayals of urban modernity in the illustrated press seem to fluctuate between, on the one hand, an antimodern nostalgia for a more tranquil time, and on the other, a basic fascination with the horrific, the grotesque and the extreme”(Singer, 1995: 86-87). While this example is not specific to the consumption of country music in the early twentieth century, it shows that modernity was not initially embraced by everyone. Perhaps, then, old-timer music was enjoyed by rural consumers because they were resisting social and industrial change.

\textsuperscript{16} The O Brother soundtrack album was a huge commercial success in the U.S. and points to the way contemporary audiences still respond to the nostalgic sound of old-
their poverty which is why they escaped jail in the first place; Everett lured them with the empty promise of a buried treasure that does not exist. As Delmar says, "You ain't no kind of man if you don't own land". The desire to transcend poverty is an experience common to many of the characters in the film. The lyrics to the country songs used on O Brother's soundtrack also suggest this. One song, "I'll Fly Away", speaks to the longing for freedom or a better place. But whether this means flying towards an unchanged past or a changed, industrialised future remains ambiguous.

In a review of the film, A.O. Scott notes that "one of the themes that threads through early-20th century American folk music—black and white, secular and scared—is the longing for another world" (2000: cited online). Again, the exact location or contents of this "world" is not explicitly stated. The song which opens the film, "Big Rock Candy Mountain" contrasts the poverty and hardship of Mississippi by alluding to a sweet-tasting world of "crystal fountains", "cigarette trees" and "lemonade springs". One part of the song even suggests that jail is no longer threatening: "In the big rock candy mountain, the jails are made of tin and you can walk right out again as soon as you walk right in".

For different reasons, Everett, Peter and Delmar long for a different world, but by the film's conclusion they still inhabit the same world of Depression-era Mississippi. The only difference is that they are no longer in prison or on the run from the law. The success of their public performance as The Soggy Bottom Boys

time country music. To date, the soundtrack has sold five million copies, spawned a documentary film, two follow-up albums, two concert tours, and won Album of the Year awards at the 2002 Country Music Awards and Grammy Awards. On March 15, 2002, the soundtrack topped the Billboard album charts 63 weeks after being released.
results in their pardon from doing any further time in jail. Country music literally saves them when nothing else could. In a sense, it is country music that brings them to a place of freedom they never imagined. The search for a new world is not granted by buried treasure, river-side baptism or even the flash flood that occurs in time to interrupt their execution by hanging. Ultimately, Everett, Pete and Delmar are rescued by the naïve optimism and ‘fabricated authenticity’ of old-time, white trash country music.

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This chapter has been concerned with the way white trash has been represented in film as a dirty version of whiteness. This dirt may be literal as in Gummo’s dirty bathwater and nameless mud-dweller. Dirt may even produce racial ambiguity as we have seen by the outlaws with dirty faces in O Brother. Dirt is abjection, but abjection is not only dirt. The relationship between white trash and abjection is primarily produced in social terms, insofar that white trash is treated with fear and loathing by class-conscious whites. White trash is, therefore, situated outside of the dominant culture because it is considered social waste. Being situated outside of the dominant culture does not mean the sexual allure of white trash goes unnoticed; if anything white trash is sexualised because it is considered forbidden. Lawn Dogs does not necessarily regard white trash as social waste; rather it perceives the affluent community in these terms because of their intolerance and insincerity—their “hatred that smiles”.

The supposed authenticity of white trash has been another recurring theme of this chapter. The three films analysed have been located within settings
often noted in U.S. culture for their white trashness: Ohio, Kentucky and Mississippi. The actual lifestyles, social/cultural practices and material conditions of these characters authenticates their white trashness. This white trash authenticity is produced in various ways including antisocial or criminal behaviour, parental neglect, trailer living, an investment in country music. But as I have argued through the analysis of *O Brother’s* country music narrative, authenticity is often manufactured for the purposes of performance.

In Chapter 3, I will be less concerned with the authenticity of white trash because I will discuss the way white trash can be constructed within a universe of camp. In many ways, authenticity is parodied by camp. When the supposed authenticity of white trash aesthetics, characters or settings are colonised within a framework of camp, they come to signify something entirely different to what they might have originally meant. Camp has often been theorised in relation to the bourgeoisie because it satirises normative codes of taste through the fetishistic appreciation of that which is largely perceived to be ‘low’ culture or bad taste. If camp loves trash, how, then, does it respond to white trash? Chapter 3 will attempt to answer this question in relation to, what I have called the “camp/trash” aesthetic of John Waters’ films.
CHAPTER 3

CAMP/TRASH FILM AESTHETICS:

JOHN WATERS

The representations of white trash in Gummo, Lawn Dogs and O Brother, Where Art Thou? are far removed from the campy representations of white trash employed by trash auteur John Waters. The former examples share a preoccupation with representing the white trash figure as mostly authentic, sincere and unselfconscious. Born in Baltimore, M.D. in 1946, Waters began making films in 1964, partly due to a fascination he had with the campy aesthetics of the 1960’s New York underground film scene. Another influence on Waters early films were ‘midnight movie’ screenings of Russ Meyer’s camp exploitation comedies like Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (1962).

While the 1960’s underground film scene and the exploitation genre camped up white trash stereotypes, it was Waters who cemented the white trash aesthetic as one that was flagrantly camp. Waters made his first film Hag in a Black Leather Jacket in 1964, the same year Susan Sontag wrote her seminal essay “Notes on Camp”. There is no evidence to suggest that Waters had read Sontag or was even buying into the literary descriptions of camp circulating at the time. There is, however, evidence that other underground filmmakers were

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1 Midnight movies were screenings of exploitation films designed to keep ‘youngsters away” and were popular in the U.S. as far back as the 1930s (Schaefer, 1999: 124-125). In the 1960s and the 1970s midnight movies were popular attractions for exploitation and blaxploitation titles. When Pink Flamingos was first screened as a midnight attraction at the Elgin Theatre in Manhattan in Winter, 1973 it made a huge impact based entirely on “word of mouth” (Waters, 1981: 21). The phenomena of midnight screenings died out in the late 1970s and early 1980s, presumably because of the videotape revolution.
aware of the new-found appreciation of a camp sensibility. For example, Waters has claimed many times that the work of underground filmmaker brothers George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar were a huge influence on his early work. Both *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (Mike Kuchar, 1965) and *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (George Kuchar, 1966) were of particular importance to Waters: "Both of 'em — they made me want to make films, they are the reason" (Waters cited in Stevenson, 1996: 72).

In a documentary on Waters' work, *Divine Trash* (Steve Yeager, 1998), the Kuchar brothers acknowledge the simultaneous emergence of Sontag's work with the underground films they made in the 1960s:

Mike Kuchar: [*Sins of the Fleshapoids*] came out at a time when there was this camp sensibility, or this appreciation for something that was considered junk before and then it's like looked at in a new way and enjoyed or something... What is this word camp? What does that mean? I don't know who invented that word... I could be mistaken but was it Susan Sontag?

George Kuchar: She was a very attractive woman (cited in *Divine Trash*, 1998).

Mike Kuchar’s description of Sontag’s idea of camp is rather vague, but George Kuchar’s response—"she was an attractive woman"—is spoken in a droll manner that undercuts any of the seriousness of his brother’s attempt to historically contextualise their work. In a way, George Kuchar’s response is camp because it plays into the way camp is linked to irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humour (Babuscio, 1977: 40-57). Camp never takes itself or that which it claims to appreciate, in serious terms. Arguably, George Kuchar does not regard Sontag’s work in serious terms; his response suggests that her work is perhaps not as interesting as her looks.
Mike Kuchar is indeed “mistaken” by stating that Sontag invented the word camp. The word “camp” first appeared in 1909, in an English dictionary of Victorian slang and was defined by J. Redding Ware as “Actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character” (Ware cited in Meyer, 1994: 75). Who is this “person of exceptional want of character” to which camp refers? Arguably, this person is a homosexual because the term camp is inextricably linked to homosexual cultures, and particularly the kind of dandy posturing that distinguished Oscar Wilde’s work and life. In a more contemporary context, camp refers to and is used mostly by male homosexuals to describe either their identities, practices, performances and tastes. It is not necessarily a derogatory term today, but if it was historically used to describe an “exceptional want of character”, then it surely was considered an undesirable identity or identification in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Camp is often attributed to male homosexuals because it is more often than not a feminised term that refers to excess and frivolity.

Although this early definition is evidence that camp was circulating as a specifically deviant act, object or idea, its specific link to the feminine can be fully identified when Sontag famously defined camp as a sensibility. Sontag’s landmark essay on Camp-with-a-capital-C was a deliberately sketchy and admittedly entertaining tour of the author’s fragmented knowledge of the more flamboyant aspects of Western literature and popular culture. Sontag begins by noting (perhaps without thoroughly checking) that camp had, to date, never been named, which means it had never been described. This simple statement allows Sontag to lay claim to certain definitional liberties, meaning, what follows is arguably the first real attempt to define this, previously unnamed
and undescribed, term. Camp is according to Sontag, a “sensibility” that is “unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it” (1983: 105). If camp is defined by Sontag as primarily referring to sensibility, then it is not difficult to see how camp has been feminised, because a sensibility refers to particular emotional attributes that have been historically linked to woman. It is because camp is framed as a sensibility, and a style, that Sontag can render it as “apolitical” (1983: 107). This one, seemingly casual remark of Sontag’s allows her to ignore the way camp was, and still is, employed as a significant marker of homosexual/gay identity. To argue that camp is apolitical is to ignore the way camp contributes to a politics of identity.

After having described camp as a sensibility, Sontag claims, “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration ... To talk about Camp is to betray it” (1982: 105). When something which has apparently remained closeted, invisible, and unnamed for so long is described, it surely is as Sontag claims, “betrayed”. As soon as something suddenly becomes a naked object of scrutiny, it is removed from its “cult” status (Sontag’s word) and positioned within the mainstream. According to Sontag’s critics (Babuscio, Bergman, Meyer) camp was betrayed—not simply by its ability to be described—but rather because Sontag minimised its relationship to homosexual cultures and communities. Sontag does devote a few rather brief and concluding notes to the relationship between camp and homosexuality, which only appear to further alienate camp from homosexuality because they appear perfunctory and underdeveloped.

But how does an aesthetic of camp, especially as it relates to Waters’ films, relate to kitsch? As I have already noted, camp employs irony as a means of understanding and processing the acts, objects or ideas colonised as camp.
This use of irony is distinct from the way an altogether different term, kitsch, is perceived. Kitsch refers to that which is mechanically reproduced; it is in distinct contrast to the avant-garde (Greenberg, 1961), and is moreover, "gracelessly sincere" (Ross, 1989: 145). Kitsch is a mode of cultural production that prides itself on being tasteful and cultured, when in reality it is an inferior replica that poses without shame, or at best the ability to be ironic. Because camp uses irony and "sees everything in quotation marks" (Sontag, 1983: 109) that it can separate itself from kitsch and, moreover differentiate between, to follow Sontag's example, a lamp from a "lamp" (1983: 109).

If kitsch is so sincere, what happens when it acknowledges its very kitschiness? Chuck Kleinhans (1994) has argued that there is such a thing as "self-aware kitsch". He writes, "[c]ontemporary culture objects are often highly self-conscious of their own de-based status" (183). The transformation of kitsch into something aware of itself occurs when audiences of kitsch cultural texts (he cites the example of films based on Harold Robbins' novels), "know this is a fantasy, but ... want in on the fun of such phenomena" (185). At this point Kleinhans admits that self-aware kitsch overlaps with camp. Kleinhans' use of the term "self-aware kitsch" is rather suspect, for surely it assumes that such examples (Harold Robbins' films) were made expressly for the purpose of an elite audience being able to delight in their melodramatic trashiness. If they had been directed only as parodies, one might agree, but they were arguably produced, with little thought at all, to supply a demand for the predominately female audience who supposedly consume such material. Kleinhans does have a point that such films overlap with a camp, but this occurs only when such representations lose their currency in the marketplace, become dated and, as
Ross argues, “become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste” (1989: 139).

Like Kleinhans, Ross perceives kitsch as a category distinct from camp, but he does not conflate the terms. Specifically, Ross perceives camp as a delight in that which is considered outmoded, abject and dead, because it had long since passed as a necessary component of contemporary culture:

A throwaway culture, moreover, is not one which simply disappears once its most popular contents have been consumed. Whether its discontents figure as waste to be recycled, ... to lie in wait until they are tastefully redeemed twenty years hence, it contains messages about the historical production of the material conditions of taste. The knowledge about history is the precise moment when camp takes over, because camp involves a rediscovery of history’s waste (151).

Even though Ross argues that camp emerges from the trash-heap of history, some camp forms attempt to disavow their status as trash. According to Sontag, camp can be either naïve or deliberate. Camp is pure when it is naïve: when its producer does not know it is camp, when its sincerity is mined by an audience who see the object as having failed in its seriousness. Camp that is produced deliberately, is “less satisfying” (110) for Sontag, and its producer “wants so badly [for the object] to be campy that they’re continually losing the beat” (111).

Naïve camp is often regarded as ‘high’ camp while deliberate camp is thought to be a ‘low’ form of camp. Kleinhans argues that low forms of camp “originate in the perception by some gay men and others that taste, or aesthetic sensibility, is also socially constructed... [A] trash imagination understands that aesthetic pleasure can be found in diverse ways, including the marginalised and excluded” (1994: 189). If a trash imagination comprehends camp, it is
because camp itself is trash. But what happens when the trash in question is white trash?

As this brief excursion into the terms of camp suggests, the histories, practices and politics of camp are complex and widely debated. In Chapter 2 I argued that white trash is at its most authentic when unselfconscious and sincere. In this context, white trash rarely parodies itself, or see itself in ironic terms, unless it behaves in the performative manner explored in *Lawn Dogs*. Waters is primarily noted for his shock-inflected white trash aesthetic, arguably more than any other filmmaker of the twentieth century. Waters' films are satirical comedies that poke fun at both bourgeois American values and the white trash underdog. Irony is the key component of Waters' brand of comedy, and it is this very ironic world view that renders his lurid characters and the landscapes they inhabit, as camp.

**John Waters: Camp/Trash Aesthetics**

The most useful definition of camp that could be linked to John Waters' aesthetic is one spoken by the filmmaker himself in an episode of "The Simpsons" (1997). In this episode, titled "Homer's Phobia", Waters makes a guest appearance as a collectable junk store owner called John. Upon visiting his store, Homer asks John why a "grown man" would collect such junk, and John replies:

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JOHN: It's camp!
Homer looks back at John with a blank expression, not comprehending what he means.
JOHN: The tragically ludicrous, the ludicrously tragic.
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2 Two anthologies have engaged with these debates: Bergman (1993) and Meyer (1994).
HOMER: Oh yeah, like when a clown dies.

JOHN: Well sort of, but I mean more like inflatable furniture or Last Supper TV trays or even this bowling shirt...

HOMER: And that kind of stuff is worth money? ... You should come over to our place, it’s full of valuable worthless junk.

A definition of camp borrowed from a mass culture context is perhaps more fitting than one provided by Sontag or any of the numerous writers who have theorised camp because academic approaches to the discourse of camp are often posed in a more serious manner while Waters’ camp aesthetic is primarily concerned with the playful celebration of “valuable worthless junk”. In many respects, this view of camp echoes Ross’s idea that camp is primarily concerned with reconstituting history’s trash as treasure. Whatever might be perceived as worthless becomes valuable when it is claimed as camp. But the value imposed on the objects of camp is subjective rather than economic because trash is, by definition, worthless. The value of camp trash only becomes economic when the culture of collecting rare or forgotten cultural minutiae—so perfectly represented by casting Waters as a collectible junk store owner—accelerates the monetary value of such objects through a process of selective fetishisation. This is a ‘selective’ process because the trash objects that fall under the spell of camp are just as select as the individuals or groups who care to cast such spells.

When Waters first started making and distributing his films, they only appealed to such select audiences—a point that can be made about most cult films. Part of the select appeal of Waters’ films was that they belonged to the category of deliberate, low camp, because there was a deliberate intention on the part of the filmmaker to “please and satisfy an audience who think they’ve seen everything. I try to force them to laugh at their own ability to be shocked by something. This reaction has always been the reason I make movies” (Waters,
1981: 2). In a contemporary context, however, the appeal of Waters’ films has extended far beyond the select few. In a review of Waters’ more recent film *Pecker*, Mark Kermode writes:

> The greatest irony of John Waters’ career is that he has ended up loving and being loved by Baltimore, the town he initially tried to infuriate. From being the most disgusting film-maker in the world, Waters has become something of a local hero, venerated for bringing an element of glitter into an area not known for its star-spangled potential (1999: 51).

This “local hero” status was certified on February 7, 1985, when it was proclaimed “John Waters Day” in his home-town of Baltimore by the presiding mayor. Despite such accolades, Kermode neglects to mention the way in which Waters has also become more generally an icon in American cinema and popular culture. For example, in recent years Waters’ camp/trash aesthetic has been celebrated within a mainstream context, evidenced by the adaptation of his 1988 film *Hairspray* into a Broadway Musical in 2002.

Unique to Waters’ aesthetic is the specific relationship he established between camp and trash right from his very first films. For this reason I have dubbed Waters’ aesthetic as a camp/trash aesthetic. All of Waters’ characters are constructed in a camp manner, regardless of their sexuality. When the characters in Waters’ films are heterosexual, their personalities are a gay parody of heterosexuality; in much the same way that his gay, lesbian, or drag characters are created as parodies. Waters’ “trash imagination” does indeed celebrate the marginal and excluded; his films elevate white trash above all else. But Waters is not concerned with white trash characters who are unaware of their trash status, and in effect think they have good taste. Rather, Waters constructs his white trash characters as pioneers of bad taste. I am speaking
here in general terms, because not all of his characters are white trash; one notable exception is the later inclusion in *Desperate Living* and *Polyester* of an overweight black character (Jean Hill) who played variations of the maid and gospel minister archetypes respectively. But it is *largely* a white trash population that inhabits Waters’ cinematic universe.

In his book *Shock Value*, Waters writes: “To understand bad taste one must have very good taste” (1981: 2). Waters is referring to the way there is good bad taste and *bad* bad taste. The distinction is a simple value judgement of whether the bad taste in question translates as a particularly good thing. For film critic Mark Spratt, good taste dominates the Hollywood studio system and encompasses family entertainment, while also “upholding law and order and democracy; avoiding social problems; and even facts of life such as birth and death; and definitely avoiding unmentionable bodily functions” (1983: 42). Good taste is not necessarily untruthful. Rather, it just omits the kinds of abject and complicated details that comprise everyday life, because good taste assumes audiences are all-too-familiar with their own realities. To indulge in good taste is to indulge in a fantasy that orders everyday life into a filmic narrative.

In terms of film, then, bad taste can be defined as representations which are deliberately excessive, set out to shock the senses and assault normative codes. Moreover, bad taste can only recognise how bad it really is by acknowledging the virtues of good taste. Like any dichotomy, the less privileged term is defined as that which it is not, or could never be. Although Waters’ earlier films celebrated bad taste, they were successful because they extolled an understanding of good taste so that it might be trashed once and for all. Upon release, *Pink Flamingos* was dubbed “an exercise in poor taste” by its
distribution company New Line Cinema. This clever pun refers to the film’s bad taste, but by using the word “poor” it also suggests its white trash class-specificity.

Waters also infused his films with a clever use of irony, and a camp sensibility that celebrated sexual perversion and filth by emphasising its ridiculous side. In this sense, Waters brand of camp could not easily be categorised as a “gay sensibility”, but then it could certainly not be regarded as a straight one either. By “gay sensibility” I am referring to the way Jack Babuscio describes camp as “a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed and defined by the fact of one’s gayness” (1977: 40). Babuscio’s definition of camp as specifically gay was responding to the way Sontag was only partly concerned with camp’s gayness. On a number of levels, Waters’ camp aesthetic shares affinities with Sontag because it is excessive and sees the world in theatricalised terms. Waters certainly understands Sontag’s claim that camp is spoken in quotation marks, but he arguably takes it a step further by typesetting his unique version of camp in bold and punctuating it with exclamation marks. Sontag’s limited universe of camp cannot account for the way Waters revels in absolute filth, celebrates white trash characters often at the expense of the bourgeoisie. This shock-inspired camp sensibility is hardly synonymous with Sontag’s views that those (homosexuals) with a camp sensibility “constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste” (1983: 117).

Waters’ films always reflect his extensive and obsessive knowledge of film, and they are often heavily influenced by a diverse range of film culture sources. Hailing from a middle-class family in suburban Baltimore, Waters would consume films with an alarming and feverish regularity, so much so that he claims to have seen the ‘high-brow’ spectrum of the film world (he often
cites Fellini, Godard, Fassbinder and Bergman), coupled with 'low-brow' underground and exploitation genres. Among the (supposed 'low-brow') directors that influenced Waters are: William Castle, whose corny horror films were furnished with on-site gimmicks; Herschell Gordon Lewis, who pioneered the low-budget gore genre; Russ Meyer, whose sleazy oeuvre lasciviously coupled dumb hunks with busty broads; Kenneth Anger, who spearheaded the underground movement with his homo-erotic paeans to motorbikes, comic books and cruising; Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey, whose deadpan glamour and superstar chic revolutionised pop culture; and George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar, whose Douglas Sirk-inspired melodramas were so incredibly lurid in colour and design it was enough to make your eyes water. While Waters may be an "aristocrat of taste" with regard to his appreciation of 'high-brow' art cinema, it was his avid consumption of marginal American exploitation genres and underground film movements that share a commonality with—and gave rise to—the practice he was to develop.

Waters' first films were short, black and white and filmed on stolen 8-mm stock. His first film _Hag in a Black Leather Jacket_ (1964) featured his long-time friend and collaborator Mary Vivian Pearce. According to Waters, the film "is about a black man and a white girl's ... wedding on the roof of my parents home. He courts her by carrying her around in a trash can and chooses a Ku Klux Klansman to perform the wedding ceremony" (1981: 41). Two years later, Waters completed _Roman Candles_, a tribute to Warhol's _The Chelsea Girls_ (1966), because it was composed of three 8 mm reels projected simultaneously. Unlike his debut film, _Roman Candles_ and his next film _Eat Your Makeup_ (1968) featured his friends Divine, Mink Stole and David Lochary who, along with Pearce, would become Waters' most recurring and popular stars. In a move
undoubtedly inspired by Warhol’s Factory of Superstars, as well as obvious
economic restrictions, Waters’ casts were friends and acquaintances from
Baltimore, rather than trained actors. Waters would write parts in his films
mostly for the aforementioned friends and star discoveries (Edith Massey,
Cookie Mueller and Jean Hill) and this group formed the core of his repertory
company Dreamland Films.

As Waters and his Dreamlanders hailed mostly from Baltimore, it
seemed the logical setting for the films, and one which was invariably
emphasised. Baltimore was—and still is—the ideal backdrop to his trash epics
because it is, in his opinion: “Trashtown, USA, the Sleaziest City on Earth, the
Hairdo Capital of the World” (Waters, 1981: 76). In a review of the 25th
Anniversary Re-release of Pink Flamingos (1997), Gus Van Sant notes how it was
not uncommon in the 1970s to use the phrase “the Baltimore aesthetic” in
response to the low or no-budget production values of Waters’ films: “It is all
part of the lowball-punk-fuck-it-who-cares-and-who’s-gonna-know-anyway
ground rules of the Baltimore aesthetic” (Van Sant, 1997: 40).

Even though Baltimore is the most consistent “character” of Waters’
films and obviously contributes to this “Baltimore aesthetic”, it often appears as
a place like any other, and is not represented as a distinguishable location. In
contrast, other American cities like New York or Los Angeles are often, and
almost always identifiable in contemporary cinema. A viewer would not
necessarily identify Baltimore as the setting for these films had it not been
established as integral to their narrative logic. Most of the time the locations
appear generic and could be any number of places. Because Waters is a

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3 Another famous filmmaker to hail from Baltimore is Barry Levinson. Born in 1942, four
years before John Waters, Levinson has made numerous Hollywood films
including Diner (1982), The Natural (1984), Good Morning, Vietnam (1987), Rain Man
(1988) among many others. The difference between Waters and Levinson is that
Waters is recognised for continually setting his films in Baltimore.
pioneering figure in American trash cinema, audiences have come to expect white trash (and to a lesser degree black trash) to inhabit ambiguous landscapes like Baltimore. Arguably, these landscapes are ambiguous because they alternate between being rural, suburban and occasionally urban. As a result, Baltimore becomes a rather non-descript landscape, an imaginary nowhere land inscribed with a range of meanings that are articulated through Waters' camp/trash aesthetic. For example, Divine's character in Pink Flamingos receives a parcel in the mail and complains to the mailman, "there's no address here". Even though the parcel is indeed addressed—vaguely, to a trailer in Maryland—it is implied that Divine is free-floating and cannot be located within one specific recognisable landscape. Residing in a mobile home only further emphasises this point.

The three early films—Hog, Roman Candles and Eat Your Makeup—have never received distribution, mostly due to the fact that Waters prefers describing their contents, and keeping them under lock and key. The circulation of myths that inevitably attends such unavailable or rarely seen products transforms these earlier efforts to a legendary status. Mondo Trasho (1969) was Waters' first feature, and often considered his first film because unlike earlier efforts, it is widely available. Moreover, Mondo Trasho was the first to star Divine in a lead role which imbues the film with an increased cult value. Mondo Trasho was filmed in 16 mm and was only interesting for the way it picks up where Kenneth Anger's Scorpio Rising (1963) left off. Scorpio Rising was notable for its images of motorbike-obsessed beefcake who cruise one another to a soundtrack of popular rock and roll songs such as "I Will Follow Him" and "Blue Velvet". The ironic use of such music emphasises the way sadomasochistic imagery can, in some contexts, be a spectacle of camp.
Unlike Scorpio Rising, Mondo Trasho’s narrative is only mock-erotic. Among many other things, Mondo Trasho features a “foot-shrimper” who goes down on Mary Vivian Pearce’s feet, and Divine fantasising that she has picked up a nude hitchhiker. The music adds an ironic layer rendering these self-consciously ‘degenerate’ or ‘perverse’ acts as humorous, rather than erotic. Even though it is attenuated by camp performances and a low-budget camp/trash aesthetic, Mondo Trasho is primarily played for laughs while Scorpio Rising encourages a certain degree of visual pleasure (particularly for gay viewers).

Following on the shrimped heels of Mondo Trasho, was the short film The Diane Linkletter Story (1969) which Waters describes as an “improvisational joke” (1983: 126). When Waters read that Art Linkletter’s LSD-frenzied daughter, Diane, had committed suicide by jumping out of a window he assembled the usual Dreamland group to improvise a re-enactment of the tragedy. Divine starred as Diane, while Pearce and Lochary played her distraught parents. The film was primarily conceived as a way of testing a 16 mm camera that Waters intended on using for his first “talking” feature Multiple Maniacs.

Filmed in 1969, but completed the following year, Multiple Maniacs stars Divine as Lady Divine, a petty criminal who believes she is “the most beautiful woman in the world”. Lady Divine and her boyfriend Mr David (Lochary) use their carnival “The Cavalcade of Perversion” as a front for crime. The cavalcade would boast a freak show of horrors so that audiences would be lured into watching “puke eaters”, “real life queers kissing on the lips”, junkies shooting

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4 The fetishisation of feet in Waters’ films is a recurring theme. Specifically, a “foot-shrimper” is someone who delights in licking another’s feet. Foot-shrimping is practiced by Raymond and Connie Marble in Pink Flamingos. In a later film Serial Mom, Waters revisits this theme when he casts a dog as a foot-shrimper to its owner.
up, and pornographers at work. At an unsuspecting moment, Lady Divine would trap the stunned audience and steal their money and drugs. The narrative of *Multiple Maniacs* is perhaps the most convoluted of all of Waters’ films, and was primarily conceived as a vehicle that would attribute the recent real-life murder of Sharon Tate to Lady Divine and Mr David. During filming, however, Charles Manson was arrested so the film was rewritten to discount the cast’s involvement in the Tate murder. *Multiple Maniacs* is perhaps most famous for its high-level images of blasphemy. In one scene a “religious whore” (Mink Stole) fucks Divine anally with a set of rosary beads in a cathedral, while reciting the stations of the cross. After the encounter, Lady Divine introduces Stole as her lesbian lover.

Of course beneath the grotesque drag personae of Divine was a young overweight drag performer, Harris Glenn Milstead, who Waters christened Divine in the mid-1960s. It is in the “rosary job” scene of *Multiple Maniacs* that the religious connotations of Divine’s name are parodied. Waters cast Divine as an occasional lesbian again in his next film *Pink Flamingos* (1972), a move which emphasised the way *all* sexualities are represented in Waters’ films as performances, and all sex acts as parodies. The “rosary job” sequence in *Multiple Maniacs* is regularly cited as the most obscene and blasphemous moment in a John Waters movie; however, the juxtaposition of a ridiculous and over-theatricalised sex act with the rituals of Catholicism underscores the way religion can be likened to theatre.

Divine’s name itself is a camp subversion of Catholicism. It is in *Multiple Maniacs* that Divine explains the significance of her name. After committing mass murder, Divine tells herself she has earned the right to be Divine. “I am Divine!” she screams melodramatically before being raped by a huge lobster, in
perhaps one of the most surreal moments in cinema since a trail of ants crawled out of a holy stigmata in Un Chien Andalou (Luis Buñuel & Salvador Dali, 1936).

These early films achieved a cult status in Waters’ hometown of Baltimore, where they were screened to sold-out audiences in cafés and (ironically enough) Catholic churches. But it wasn’t until his next feature, and the first in colour, Pink Flamingos, that Waters was to achieve universal acclaim and notoriety.

The Filthiest People Alive: Pink Flamingos

Pink Flamingos is the story of Divine (played, of course, by Divine), a shock-fetishist who reigns in underground circles as “the filthiest person alive". Having adopted the pseudonym, Babs Johnson, Divine lives in a mobile home in the rural outskirts of Baltimore with her son and lover Crackers (Danny Mills), her “travelling companion” Cotton (Pearce), and her retarded, egg-obsessed mother (Massey). On the other side of town live Raymond and Connie Marble (Lochary and Stole), a filth and crime-obsessed middle-class couple who have declared war on Babs/Divine⁵ in the hope they will be recognised as “the filthiest people alive”. Babs revels in her own filth, and perceives authentic white trash living as a kind of terrorism on the middle-class values to which the Marble couple aspire. However, while Raymond and Connie Marble primarily imitate middle-class values—evidenced by their opulent house, its furnishings, their butler, and their forced arrogance—they sell drugs to school children and run a black market baby-selling ring. After kidnapping young white girls, they

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⁵ Although this character is known by both names in Pink Flamingos, all subsequent references will name her as Babs to avoid confusion between the character portrayed in the film and the actor Divine.
force their gay butler (Channing Wilroy) to inseminate them, and keep the girls imprisoned in a dungeon-like cellar for the duration of their pregnancy. Once the babies are born, they are sold to wealthy lesbian couples. As far as Babs is concerned, the kind of filth performed by the Marble's is self-conscious, forced and unworthy of being categorised as true trash. Babs, of course, wins the "filth" war, conducts a press conference and kangaroo court to personally convict the Marble's of "assholism", and then executes them while the reporters take photos.

Like Multiple Maniacs, Pink Flamingos is laced with Waters' criminal obsessions. In one scene, Babs walks past a wall bearing the graffiti "Free Tex Watson", which refers to one of the men involved in the Charles Manson trial. Babs herself is modelled on Manson, a parallel which Waters documents much later in his photographic work Manson Copies Divine's Hairdo (1993) (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1
John Waters, Manson Copies Divine's Hairdo (1993)
Divine's look for Pink Flamingos is modelled on Charles Manson.
In the 1990s Waters began an art career that documents his obsession with film and pop culture in the photographic medium. A majority of his art practice consists of "re-directing" existing films by taking photographs from a television screen and arranging the stills in a configuration entirely different from the original source. Waters describes this process as "photographing a favorite movie the way I want to remember it, no matter what the original director had in mind" (Waters, 1997: 283).

While Waters injects his films with a camp aesthetic, they are unequivocal celebrations of white trash culture. But according to cultural critic Gael Sweeney, camp and white trash are worlds apart, and suggest dissimilar modes of performance and production. Using Divine, Dolly Parton and a portrait of Elvis as examples, Sweeney writes:

Camp is elitist, of the upper middle class and urban, while White Trash is rooted in the rural and the working class. White Trash is sincere, where Camp is deliberate and parodic. Divine was an icon of Camp; Dolly Parton is an icon of White Trash; both privilege big hair, gold lamé, and exaggerated bodies, but Divine was a drag parody of a "trashy" woman, while Dolly's persona grew out of a Kentucky backwoods child's naive idea of glamour. White Trash may buy the same portrait of Elvis and hang it proudly in the living room, but Camp displays it as a parody, to outrage the dominant taste, while White Trash displays it because it is beautiful (1997: 251).

Waters sits somewhere between the white trash and camp aesthetic because as a middle-class, homosexual filmmaker, Waters can afford to be camp: it comes with the territory. His representations of white trash are not naïve, unselconscious and authentic as they might be with the films examined in Chapter 2. Waters' films have an insidiously ironic tone. White trash figures are
always represented as heroes, as underdogs who overcome adversity and middle-class repression through the strangest and most unlikely means. Divine embodies this white trash identity, which is unsurprising as he played “the filthiest person alive”, but his campy glamorous drag aesthetic also allowed for an irony to emerge that may not have been possible had it been a pure unselfconscious white trash representation.

*Pink Flamingos* celebrates white trash by repeatedly aligning it with excrement and waste. If camp, as previously stated by Andrew Ross, emerges out of a deliberate reclaiming of history’s waste, *Pink Flamingos* is a film that has its cake (read shit) and eats it too. In other words, the low camp of *Pink Flamingos* knows it is camp, primarily because it is a deliberate representation as opposed to a pure and naïve form. Waste is an important component of camp, be it symbolic or in this case, literal. The depiction of waste in *Pink Flamingos* as the literal motif of white trashness dovetails with Waters’ low camp aesthetic because a low camp aesthetic is *always* a trash aesthetic.

In their collaborative essay “Divinity”, Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon argue that fat women (“divas”) and gay men are historically linked primarily because “the diva’s body has never lost its representational magnetism for many of us [gay men] as an alternative body identity fantasy” (199: 216). Sedgwick and Moon agree that Divine embodies this linkage or “fantasy” because in many ways Divine performs a particularly gay—though I would call it camp—model of divadom. As on overweight drag performer acting the role of “the filthiest woman alive”, Divine’s fat body (or fat waist) becomes the primary signifier of waste. Weight signifies waste, because Divine is represented in *Pink Flamingos* as all-consuming, cannibalistic and obsessed with excrement.
For Sedgwick and Moon waste is important to *Pink Flamingos* because the decade in which it was made was noted for its new-found obsession with the circulation and recycling of waste:

The concept of “ecology” itself, with its profoundly, permanently destabilizing anthropomorphization of the planet as a single living body, emerged in the 1970s much less from the question of how to feed its inhabitants than from that of how to contain or innocuously to recirculate their wastes ... The issue (in many ways a startlingly new one) of the very viability of our planet has emerged as the need, not merely to limit waste, but—no doubt you’ll pick up on the paradox involved—to eliminate it. Which, paradoxically again, can only mean to consume it (1993: 235).

The consumption of waste in *Pink Flamingos* brings about its elimination, but only in the sense that this act of consuming waste is the necessary proof that one is indeed “the filthiest person alive”. For Babs and her cohorts, waste becomes a privileged thing because it sets them apart as filthy, proving that one must consume filth in order to be filthy. You are what you eat, so to speak. But it is because waste is constantly being re-circulated, it is never truly eliminated.

*Pink Flamingos* includes numerous instances where excrement is represented in these terms. The first is when Babs receives a parcel on her birthday. Upon opening it, Babs is much to her disgust greeted with human excrement: “Oh my God almighty”, she shrieks, “someone has sent me a bowel movement!” Babs then opens the card which reads “Happy Birthday, Fatso! You are no longer the filthiest person alive, we are”. Babs is mortified by the parcel primarily because the prank is perceived as the puerile work of people whose filth is posed and unreal. The scene suggests that the motive of the sender is more offensive than the actual gift because it is, as she claims, “a direct attack on my Divinity”. In an earlier scene, Babs spontaneously defecates
on the front lawn of a large mansion, more it seems for the joy of pissing on middle-class values and getting away with it, than a deliberate attempt to hurt anyone. The turd sent in the mail is offensive for Babs, however, because it attempts to upstage her well-established career of filth. Having passed from a vulgar source, the gift of shit is ironically marked as unclean and cannot be consumed or used. Babs must, therefore, eliminate the producers of this shit: “We must out-filth the asshole or assholes who sent this and they must die”.

Unsurprisingly, *Pink Flamingos* is littered with references to the asshole. In the former example, an asshole refers to an enemy or assailant. When Raymond and Connie are captured, Babs finds them guilty of “assholism”. On another level, the asshole features in *Pink Flamingos* as a strictly corporeal entity. During Babs’ birthday party, a nameless exhibitionist uses his well-trained asshole as a vehicle for lip-synching to the music heard on the soundtrack. According to the film’s screenplay: “He contorts his body to the enthusiastic cheering of guests... Close-up of his asshole opening and closing in such a way that it appears to be singing” (Waters, 1988: 54). While this act relies heavily on the anus, it is not perceived as the kind of assholism practiced by Raymond and Connie. Instead, the “singing asshole” demonstrates the way filth (or bodily waste) is linked quite obviously with the asshole, and how this filth must be celebrated, made visible, and above all, be entertaining. Sedgwick and Moon note that the anus is central to the film, and inherent in its title which they re-accent as “Pink Flaming O’s” (1993: 246). Following on from the anus-inspired writings of Leo Bersani and D. A. Miller, Sedgwick and Moon write:

The rectum is demonstrably not a grave nor the anus simply a cut in the representational scheme. This pink, flaming asshole not only makes an

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impressive show of something we think deserves to be called self-determination, it speaks, and indeed sings (248).

Waters arguably regards the anus in similar terms to Sedgwick and Moon. In the film the anus is linked to waste, which by its very definition as waste means it is subject to recirculation. In 1996 Waters produced a photographic work called *12 Assholes and a Dirty Foot* (Figure 3.2) where his own image of the “singing asshole” is recycled and situated beside eleven other images of assholes, found from hardcore porn films. The series is completed with a dirty foot because it is an image which is as uncommon in porn as an asshole unfettered by other body parts.

![Figure 3.2](image)

John Waters, *12 Assholes and a Dirty Foot* (1996). Detail. Waters “re-directs” the “singing asshole” (right) by positioning it next to a porno still.

By “re-directing” his own image, Waters recycles his own trash and inscribes it with new meanings specific to the 1990s. For example, in the 1980s the asshole came to be associated with AIDS and this association had not been entirely renounced in 1996 when *12 Assholes* was produced. *Pink Flamingos* emerged at a time when porn films had just been legalised as a mass cultural
form, the famous example being *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972). *Pink Flamingos*, however, regards sex as ludicrous and unerotic, which hardly lends itself to being part of the porn revolution. Upon its release, *The New York Times* rightly claimed that *Pink Flamingos* was "beyond pornography" (cited on DVD release, 2001). It is ironic, but unsurprising, that Waters should align the "singing asshole" with images from contemporary porn films because as a "re-directed" series of images they barely resemble their originating sources.

If waste is represented in *Pink Flamingos* through the body's ability to recycle its own excrement—the anus and human excrement—how does the body in its entirety become a site of waste? The first instance of the body being regarded as waste is when Babs and her friends kill and then eat a number of policemen who had attempted to raid her birthday party. The body is literally treated as a food source, which means it eventually becomes waste for the body that consumes it. Babs and her cohorts' filth is confirmed because they regard their own bodies as the ultimate human waste disposal unit, because the most effective and traceless way to dispose of a dead body is to eat it.

In another scene, Babs and her son Crackers use their own saliva to curse the Marble's home when they lick all of its contents. Babs and Crackers work themselves into such a frenzy that they become aroused, leading to a sexual encounter where Babs performs oral sex on Crackers. Babs says to Crackers: "My own flesh and blood, my own heritage, my own genes. Let Mama receive you like Communion. Let Mama make a gift to you, a gift so special it will curse this house years after we're gone. Oh Crackers, a gift of supreme mothergood, a gift of DIVINITY!" (Waters, 1988: 61). In this scene, oral sex is likened to the Catholic ritual of communion (where the body of Christ is consumed in symbolic form). Though the scene is sexual, greater emphasis is
placed on the act of consuming the body orally, as if it is food. In other words, Crackers’ penis is received like Holy Communion; he is symbolically eaten alive.

Though these examples illustrate the way the body is consumed to varying degrees as waste, the legendary final scene of the film confirms the way excrement is regarded as a privileged delicacy of sorts. After executing the Marble’s, Babs qualifies her filth status and thus seals her “Divinity” by performing the most shocking act imaginable: she eats dog shit (Figure 3.3). The scene occurs in a single take so that an audience will be convinced that Divine actually performed this shit-eating stunt.7 Divine approaches a dog which had just defecated on the sidewalk. She bends down and eats it. As the screenplay for the film notes, “She rolls it around on her tongue and gags and winks at the camera. Zoom in on Divine giving a shit-eating grin to the camera and the audience” (1988: 90).

Figure 3.3
Divine eats dog shit in the film’s most famous scene.

7 Waters has defended the authenticity of this scene in numerous interviews as well as his own writings: “And yes, for the thousandth, for the millionth, for the trillionth time, Divine really did eat dog shit at the end of the film” (Waters, 1988: ix).
While these acts either literally or symbolically represent the body as waste through the performance of filth or the recirculation of the body as waste, it is framed by Babs as a mere expression of her political beliefs. In an attempt to capitalise on the sensationalising instincts of the tabloid media, Babs boldly states to a reporter: “Kill everyone now! Condone first degree murder! Advocate cannibalism! Eat shit! Filth is my politics, filth is my life!” In *Pink Flamingos* filth is primarily represented through Babs/Divine’s crimes, a theme which dominated again in Waters’ next film *Female Trouble* where crime specifically becomes an aesthetic. Crime becomes a thing of beauty.

**Crime is Beauty: Female Trouble**

After the success of *Pink Flamingos*, Waters made *Female Trouble* in 1974. *Female Trouble* was conceived as more of a vehicle for Divine’s talents now that both Waters and his star were receiving considerable attention. In *Female Trouble*, Divine is cast as Dawn Davenport, a career criminal whose life is represented from high school juvenile delinquent to her death in the electric chair. Divine also plays a male character Earl Peterson, by whom Divine falls pregnant after running away from home. The scene in which they have sex is carefully choreographed to appear as if Divine is fucking himself, even though a body double was used for this scene (Figure 3.4). Once she is pregnant, Dawn demands money from Earl who simply says: “go fuck yourself”. Of course, because of Divine’s double casting, Dawn had already, to a degree, “fucked herself”. Earl’s words reinforce just how “fucked” Dawn’s situation is because she is now pregnant, broke and homeless. Dawn gives birth in a cheap hotel
without medical assistance and thereafter supports herself and her daughter Taffy through money raised from petty crimes.

![Figure 3.4](image)

Divine plays Earl Peterson in addition to Dawn Davenport. In this scene Divine “fucks himself” on a dirty mattress in the woods.

It is through Dawn’s status as a petty criminal that the main theme of *Female Trouble*—“crime is beauty”—is established. In *Pink Flamingos* crime is also a lifestyle, though it is perceived in “underground” terms. In other words, Babs inhabits the fringe of culture, commits her crimes on the sly and is rarely malicious. Dawn, on the other hand, is self-centred and will do anything to become a star. Dawn marries an equally self-centred hairdresser called Gator (Michael Potter), and after a time he starts preferring his tool kit to Dawn. Gator’s lesbian Aunt Ida (Massey) resents Dawn because she would rather Gator was gay. Upon meeting elite couple Donald and Donna Dasher (Lochary and Pearce), Dawn’s career in crime finally takes off. They transform Dawn into a “crime model” by taking photos of her committing various crimes to prove their theory that “crime is beauty”. The Dasher’s gradually brainwash Dawn into believing that “crime enhances one’s beauty; the worse the crime gets, the more ravishing one becomes”. When Aunt Ida throws acid in Dawn’s face in a
fit of rage, the Dasher’s convince Dawn that she is just as glamorous as before, if not more so.

*Female Trouble* satirises headline-grabbing criminals and serial killers who capitalise on media exposure and, as in his former two films, is influenced by the Manson trials. Of course, *Female Trouble* was made at a time when the media had not become the globalised entity it is today, but the film certainly pre-empts the way crime was becoming a commodity. Twenty years after *Female Trouble*, Waters made *Serial Mom* (1994) which continued to explore such themes about the often tenuous link between criminality and celebrity. In *Serial Mom*, Kathleen Turner plays a serial killer housewife whose career in crime reaches an all-time high when the rights to her story are sold for a Hollywood film.

While filth/waste/trash are recurring themes in *Pink Flamingos*, and central to the formation of Babs Johnson’s politics, Dawn Davenport is a white trash exhibitionist less obsessed with excrement, than she is with the attention she receives through her crimes. Dawn’s face is streaked with scars; she quite literally appears as if she has been ‘trashed’. The working title of *Female Trouble* was *Rotten Face, Rotten Mind* which implies Dawn is not as beautiful as she would have us believe. But Dawn believes her beauty is guaranteed simply because she is regularly photographed by the Dasher’s as their “crime model”, when really, she is a passive vehicle for their “beauty experiment”.

Though she thinks of her beauty as unique, Dawn’s ‘look’ is borrowed from Elizabeth Taylor. In an essay on Elizabeth Taylor’s body, cultural critic Melissa Jane Hardie writes that “Taylor’s biographers ... offer her body as grotesque, a characteristic apparent as much in its ability to shed as to gain weight” (1995: 161). In many ways, Taylor becomes an icon of camp because of
all the "fleshy" excess glamour associated with the numerous on-screen versions of Taylor, as well as the myths attending her private life. With reference to a particular incident in which Taylor acknowledged her campness, Hardie writes that Taylor is camp because camp is "founded on its own status as impersonation, projection, a phenomenon of proximation or proximity" (Hardie, 169-170). In real life, Divine’s immediate relation (or "proximation") to Taylor is expressed at the level of fandom, because as Waters notes, "Of all the Dreamlanders, Divine wanted to be famous the most. As a child, he worshipped Elizabeth Taylor and vowed to someday be a star" (1981: 142). In Female Trouble Dawn Davenport’s image occasionally pays homage to Divine’s actual identification or obsession with Taylor. The fact that Divine had "vowed to someday be a star" because of Taylor, parallels Dawn’s steadfast desire to be famous. On another level, a comparison between Divine and Taylor can be drawn in relation to their weight. Divine’s overweight body was as inextricably linked to her public image as Taylor’s. Like Divine, it was Taylor’s “ability to shed as to gain weight” that rendered her “grotesque”. In one of his “re-directed” photo works Doubles (1995), Waters makes the connection between Dawn Davenport and Elizabeth Taylor even more explicit (Figure 3.5).

Whatever the references to Elizabeth Taylor’s star image might mean, the aesthetic employed in this film is as campy, garish, ‘low’ and trash-obsessed as Pink Flamingos. However, Waters’ $25,000 budget for Female Trouble was considerably greater than the $12,000 budget for Pink Flamingos. The increased budget is certainly evident in Female Trouble in the way its sets, costumes, hair

8 In Pink Flamingos a film poster for Boom (Joseph Losey, 1968) is pinned to the wall in Raymond and Connie Marble’s house. Starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, Boom was referenced in relation to the Marble’s (rather than Divine) because as Waters puts it, their house is decorated “with posters from critically panned movies” (1981: 5). The fact that audiences might acknowledge Boom as “critically panned” magnifies the fact that the Marble’s have no taste.
and make-up designs are more lurid and self-consciously campy than its predecessor. The idea was to celebrate white trash culture, but execute

![Figure 3.5](image)


Dawn Davenport’s ‘look’ is borrowed from Elizabeth Taylor (right).

it in a more stylised manner than before. As Waters notes in *Shock Value*, “It seemed I had finally climbed out of the underground” (109). This comment refers to a number of things which contributed to *Female Trouble* being a turning point for Waters. While the film was certainly not a mainstream studio product, it was the first time Waters had full support from a distributor while it was being made. The success of *Pink Flamingos* can be largely attributed to New Line Cinema, who had started acquiring Waters’ films in 1972. They had marketed *Pink Flamingos* to ‘midnight movie’ audiences, which over time built a strong word of mouth and made it a sound long-term investment. But with *Female Trouble*, Waters’ films were now being screened in reputable theatres. It was as if the film brought an underground movie sensibility to a much larger audience, a majority of which had probably never seen an underground film. In her biography on her son Divine, Frances Milstead relays an anecdote about *Female Trouble* which sets the tone for the way this film was receiving much
attention outside of underground circles. In 1974, Frances Milstead was estranged from Divine, and was unaware her son was a famous actor and drag performer. Frances Milstead learned of her son’s fame through an article in *Life* magazine, and only days later heard about—and watched—a film screening near her home starring Divine called *Female Trouble* (Milstead, 2001: 1-4).

While *Female Trouble* does not represent the excesses of camp and white trash in overly scatological terms, it is still obsessed with an aesthetic of filth. This aesthetic is expressed through its locations (garbage dumps and seedy alley ways); Dawn’s reverse ideas about what constitutes beauty; and lastly, the way in which Dawn is ultimately disposed of when she is greeted with the electric chair. While Dawn is considered human garbage, and dumped accordingly, she regards her life as award-winning and makes a speech that is a parody of an Academy Awards acceptance speech just before being electrocuted. Crime as the ultimate expression of trash is as central to *Female Trouble* as it was *Pink Flamingos*. In his next film *Desperate Living* (1977), Waters elaborates on this theme of crime by representing the criminals as cogs in a fascist monarchy located in Mortville: a town for human trash.

**A Town Without Pity: *Desperate Living***

Mortville is an imaginary town of over-ripe kitschy excess located on the rural outskirts of Baltimore. Social outcasts, deviants and criminals live in Mortville, and submit to the fascist monarchy of Queen Carlotta (Massey). Middle-class Baltimore resident and recovering out-patient from a mental hospital Peggy Gravel (Stole) and her black maid Grizelda (Jean Hill) escape to Mortville after they “accidentally” murder Peggy’s husband. After fleeing Peggy’s suburban
home, they encounter an abandoned rural location which disgusts Peggy because she has an aversion to nature. Peggy rants and raves until Grizelda loses all patience:

    GRIZELDA    Do you ever shut up? The police are looking for us, you know. We're gonna camp out here overnight.
    PEGGY      CAMP OUT? NO, PLEASE, GRIZELDA! NOT THAT! I'LL DO ANYTHING YOU ASK, BUT PLEASE NOT THAT!

This exchange of dialogue is particularly ironic because the film does not employ a camp aesthetic until a few scenes later when the two women are in Mortville. Peggy does not want to "camp out" because, as she says to Grizelda, "You know I hate nature. Look at these disgusting trees stealing my oxygen... All natural forests should be turned into housing developments". By articulating a hatred of "camping out" in nature, Waters' dialogue forecasts the camp aesthetic of Mortville because, according to Sontag, "Camp taste effaces nature, or else contradicts it outright" (1983: 109). When in Mortville, only scenes later, Peggy is greeted with a camp aesthetic that she finds extremely distasteful because it is trashy and low, and moreover, located in the rural, 'natural' fringe setting of Mortville.

    Like his earlier films, Desperate Living continues to align camp and trash, though arguably on a grander, more realised scale. One review of Desperate Living claimed, "[Waters] remains the visionary of camp and the den mother of the bizarre. The film is a triumphant example of the most vital bad taste in America" (Waters, 1988: cited on screenplay's book cover). Even though "Mortville was made almost entirely out of garbage" (Waters, 1981: 167) it was produced on a budget of $65,000, making it his most ambitious project (up until that time). The narrative was constructed as a fairytale parody that required
numerous sets, costumes, extras, and an elaborate production design to draw out its camp/trash aesthetic. The characters who reside in Mortville are continually referred to as trash, and class-conscious Peggy is “mortified” by her new home, referring to her new neighbours as trash: “You’re so low, you make white trash look positively top drawer” says Peggy to Mole (played by Susan Lowe, whose last name is referenced in this line of dialogue).

In my discussion of Pink Flamingos I argued that Waters’ vision of camp is inextricably liked to trash because both terms share an investment in waste. Camp recycles waste from the trash-heap of history, while a trash aesthetic can be camp when it is produced in deliberately low terms. Desperate Living is certainly trash-obsessed, but mostly because it perceives the human body as the ultimate site of abjection and revulsion. The body expels waste to live, and thus exists in a constant state of waste. As Kristeva writes, “Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit” (Kristeva, 1980: 3). The title of the film alludes to the way in which white trash living is “desperate” because one is always fighting off the risk of death. The residents of Mortville exist in fear of their own death; the town is literally named after death. Even necrophilia is practiced in Mortville: the Queen’s daughter, Princess Coo-Coo (Pearce), cannot accept her garbage-collector boyfriend had been murdered by the Queen’s leather-clad soldiers (known as the Goons).

Ironically, the white trash characters in Mortville do not practice the ascetic state of self-punishment and self-humiliation, required as a key tenet of mortification. Instead, they affect mortification on others. The Queen constantly punishes her Goon squad by spanking them, even though it visibly brings them pleasure. In one scene, the white trash residents of Mortville are humiliated for
Queen Carlotta’s own amusement, when she makes them endure Backwards Day. Upon making her subjects dress and walk backwards for an entire day, Queen Carlotta has her soldiers carry her through the street on a raised platform so she can laugh and jeer at the townsfolk: “Hey moron, you got your clothes on backwards! Oh God, this is fun! Hi, stupid! Hi, ugly”. Mortification is represented less as a humbling experience, and instead as a violent and potentially fatal experience. For example, in a scene set in Mortville’s lesbian bar, Flipper (Mueller) performs a ritual man-bashing, first with a whip, and then with a frying pan.

Whether they like it or not, the residents of Mortville exist in a constant state of mortification, because they are human trash. They are punished and humiliated because of their very trashiness. Queen Carlotta perceives them as trash and orders them to always dress as such. “When you walk down the streets of Mortville, make sure you dress like what you are: Trash!” she declares early in the film. All of the costumes used in the film are recycled bits of garbage; for example, the above mentioned Flipper wears bits of recycled fabrics, tinsels, fur, in addition to aluminium pie trays as bra cups (Figure 3.6). Indeed for few of the film’s characters, recycled trash can be transformed into a low parody of haute couture fashion.

As in the majority of Waters’ films, Desperate Living thrives on the logic that trash is punished by society, as much as it is celebrated and revered. The theme of cannibalism, originally explored in Pink Flamingos, also recurs in Desperate Living. The ultimate villain of the film, Queen Carlotta, is overthrown when Mortville’s lesbian community, led by Mole and Muffy (Liz Renay) kill, cook and eat the Queen in the film’s final scene. Queen Carlotta’s body is
recirculated as food because as far as Mole is concerned, "we got ourselves the biggest turkey in the world—so why not eat her?"

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 3.6**

In the scene at Mortville's lesbian bar, Flipper (Cookie Mueller) wears recycled trash as high low fashion
(Production Still from Dreamland Productions)

The Queen is perhaps the most lavish meal ever consumed in Mortville, and presented for the town as the centrepiece in a large festive banquet. While the film concludes with the disgusting, but nonetheless lavish image of the Queen's body as food for the poor, the opening credit sequence represents the reverse of this concept. The opening sequence depicts an overhead shot of a formal table setting upon which a dinner plate is served, consisting of a cooked rat. A set of hands enter the frame (soon to be identified as Peggy's) who appears to be consuming the dead rodent. If the film begins with the rich eating trash, the film concludes with an image of human trash eating the rich. One of
the promotional posters (Figure 3.7) for the film used this image of the rat as a selling point.

![Desperate Living poster](image)

Figure 3.7
Promotional poster for *Desperate Living*.

Numerous other scenes represent the way in which food is as central to the narrative as waste. Muffy has a failed sex change which leads her to perform a self-castration; when she tosses the penis away, a dog comes along and eats it. In two of the lesbian sex scenes, oral sex encounters are referred to as “eating”, demonstrating again the way the body is a food source—however abstract it may be in this instance.

*Desperate Living* was the last film Waters made in the 1970s, and was also the last where he employed self-conscious attempts to shock and outrage his audiences through comedic means. After *Desperate Living* Waters softened his direction somewhat because he realised audiences expected to be shocked, and
they would inevitably be disappointed. Though his films in the 1980s and 1990s were less obsessed with shock value, they continued to explore the well-traversed themes of crime, fashion, celebrity, gender and sexual perversion (or subversion) and were still occasionally peppered with scatological humour. Waters also maintained a camp/trash aesthetic in these later films, though it was more polished than his earlier 1960s and 1970s efforts.

*Desperate Living* was followed with the suburban housewife melodrama *Polyester* (1981), which starred Divine, noted Hollywood actor Tab Hunter, and some of the regular Dreamland cast. Waters did not make another film until the successful mainstream crossover *Hairspray* (1988)—his last with Divine who died only weeks after its premiere in Baltimore. *Hairspray* was followed with *Cry-Baby* (1990), Waters’ homage to juvenile delinquency in the 1950s starring Johnny Depp in the lead role. In 1994 Waters made *Serial Mom* with Kathleen Turner and Sam Waterston. After his next film *Pecker* (1998), which is discussed in the next section, Waters made *Cecil B. Demented* (2000), a satirical film about guerrilla filmmaking, that was in some ways a return to some of his earlier shock tactics.

**Art Imitating Life: Pecker**

In *Pecker*, the eponymous character’s nickname derives from having pecked at his food as a child. Of course, Waters is being ironic because Pecker (Edward Furlong) is white trash, and it is this very white trashness that later becomes his ticket to celebrity. Deriving from ‘woodpecker’, the American terms ‘pecker’ and ‘peckerwood’ can be traced back to as early as 1929, when they were used to describe poor rural white males (Ayto, 1998: 39). As slang, peckerwood is a
rather outdated in a contemporary context and rarely used to describe what it once meant. In a contemporary context, peckerwood and pecker have been eclipsed in popularity by terms like white trash, hillbilly and redneck.

Pecker is a cheerful amateur photographer who photographs the eccentricities of his working-class family and Baltimore community. In one scene, Pecker’s white trashness is explicitly articulated when he is called Peckerwood. The word pecker also elicits phallic connotations, as it is a popular slang term used to describe the penis. It is not Pecker himself who is depicted in phallic terms, but rather his camera and what it represents. One of the taglines used to promote *Pecker* capitalises on this phallic pun: “He never realised how far 35 mm would take him”. When Pecker is first discovered by a New York art dealer Rory (Lili Taylor) he is transformed into an art world star, much to the derision of those he had photographed in Baltimore. Pecker’s photographs land him in trouble with his own community because his subjects had been photographed without realising that their image would be widely disseminated. Pecker’s overnight success turns his seemingly innocent photographs into invasive and interrogative images, exposing a majority of his Baltimore subjects as white trash caricatures, caught in unguarded moments or acts of crime.

Pecker’s work is a hit in New York because it appears to be the product of an authentic “outsider” sensibility, one that commodifies and glamorises the experience of the white trash other. His images have, on the one hand, a naïve snapshot style which elicits a certain innocence, something his friends and family can identify with; on the other, it is this ‘innocence’ and ‘naivety’ that later become for the New York art scene an authentic white trash aesthetic. For the elite connoisseur, the white trash other is mythologised by its own excesses.
Unsurprisingly, Pecker himself is fresh-faced and innocent, which goes to show that white trash is at its most authentic when unselfconscious and sincere. In another context, Pecker’s sincerity can be read as the work of a white trash idiot savant; his photographs are ethnographic evidence of real, that is, unmediated white trash identities. As Waters claims "Like everything else about Pecker’s family, in context it’s completely normal. Out of context, people snigger and laugh. Irony changes everything" (Waters cited in Miller, 1999: 60).

Like all of Waters’ films, Pecker is laced with a camp sensibility, where irony is celebrated at all turns. Camp’s often snidely intellectual taste for irony indeed seems at odds with the supposed sincerity of a white trash aesthetic. While Pecker’s narrative uses irony and camp, it is represented in rather affectionate or “cheesy” terms; another tagline used for the film, was “Say Cheese”. The poster art for Pecker (Figure 3.8) depicts Pecker holding his camera to his face accompanied with this tag line. Mock negative film strips (shown in positive) frame his face, with a separate strip used above his image to show photographic evidence of his eccentric white trash family. The tag-line alerts the viewer to the film’s “cheesy”, mostly inoffensive wit. But that is not to say that Waters dislikes or treats his earlier white trash bandits in unaffectionate terms. Rather, it is the gentle, sincere tone of Pecker that aligns it, for example, with his more ‘family-oriented’ films Hairspray and Cry-Baby.

Generally, white trash aesthetics are very popular in recent American cinema. This white trash aesthetic normalises excess and poor taste without really considering the implications. White trash is the ultimate postmodern aesthetic because as Sweeney notes, a “decentering and fragmentation is reflected in the White Trash Aesthetic’s fixation with bits and pieces, with minutia and trivia, with display and decoration of the surface over
contemplation of the interior, and on reproduction and speed over singularity and permanence, consumerism over art” (2001: 145).

Sweeney’s last point about white trash privileging consumerism over art is particularly telling in relation to Pecker, because even though Pecker becomes an art star, his initial motivation for taking pictures was for the pure pleasure derived from the act. Pecker takes photos in an attempt to frame the world around him. In a sense this framing can be likened to positioning something within quotation marks. But Sontag’s definition of camp as a perception of things in quotation marks depends on a deliberate attempt to produce something as camp. Pecker does not perceive his world as camp. Instead, Pecker documents his world because taking photos is his hobby; he was not to know his pictures would be reproduced on the cover of Art Forum, and earn
him the approval of renowned photographer Cindy Sherman (who appears in the film as herself).

White trash is postmodern because it can be characterised (usually by privileged whites) as an ongoing contradiction. The term white trash itself embodies this in the sense that it evokes a dirty whiteness. Sweeney argues that white trash is postmodern because it is everywhere and nowhere, seen but not disclosed, like a guilty secret. White Trash is our repressed Other, carrying no cache of oppressed race or ethnic identity, but only an aggressive materiality and an aesthetic that, perhaps of all that claim that status, is truly postmodern. White Trash is an aesthetic of ultimate marginalization (2001: 144).

Later in her essay, Sweeney offers her postmodern white trash figure another historical name tag when she christens it “neo-baroque”. Deriving from the Italian word “barroco”, “baroque” means an irregularly shaped pearl. For Sweeney, it is the baroque’s celebration of irregularity and dynamic oppositions, along with its contortion of appropriated forms into its own recognisable aesthetic that makes white trash what it is in contemporary film and popular culture. While the baroque was perceived as new and challenging to classical ideals, its critics saw the baroque as grotesque, extravagant and corrupt. It is the dualistic—neither here nor there, both dynamic and debased—characterisation of the white trash aesthetic that renders it as “neo-baroque”. Sweeney’s last reason for the terminology is that at its basic level, baroque refers to the organically manufactured pearl:

Pearls, like White Trash, are born of an irritant in the system, an itch within that broods and works itself into a hard, sometimes grotesque pit that could be, in the right setting and with the right interpretation, a jewel. But White Trash is
always itself, without qualm or excuse, and without permission from the Northern, mainstream elites that sanctify their own taste (2001: 145).

Sweeney’s characterisation of white trash as a pearl is evocative, and particularly useful for a reading of Pecker. All of the Baltimore-based characters are represented by Waters as unaffected, mostly happy and content. They do not need any New York validation, and though it is welcomed initially, it quickly becomes an irritably condescending world that prizes itself on its ability to celebrate marginal forms and make them their own. When Pecker and his work is embraced by the art world, they immediately regard his life and subjects from the outside looking in, as “culturally challenged”. Pecker’s most photographed subject, his girlfriend Shelley (Christina Ricci) is a proud owner of a Baltimore Laundromat (Figure 3.9). When she reads the Village Voice review of Pecker’s show, she is offended that the reviewer had called her a “Stain Goddess”. The New York art world swallows up Pecker’s product because he is nothing more than the latest buzz word, a product so hyped for its exotic charm that it now means the exact opposite of what it initially

![Figure 3.9](image)
Pecker’s photo of Shelley (Christina Ricci) reacting to having her photo taken after being called a “Stain Goddess” (Photograph by Chuck Shacochis).
represented. In Pecker, it is this appetite for irony that is championed by the New York art world and criticised by the film. By embracing a white trash aesthetic, they are laying claim to the latest in a long line of postmodern aesthetics. By perfectly embodying an “aesthetic of ultimate marginalization”, Pecker’s white trash pictures appear to be not so much the work of an emerging young artist, but the inevitable production of a postmodern Zeitgeist. In other words, had Pecker remained undiscovered, it would be fair to say that some other marginal artist would have taken the crown. And indeed this happens, when after being abandoned by Pecker, his New York dealer Rory discovers the “first blind photographer”.9

Even though Pecker represents white trash aesthetics as genuine, authentic and sincere, it does not depict white trash as helplessly ignorant. As Pecker’s fame grows his world is turned upside down and his friends become increasingly distrustful and begin to regard the New York hype as artificial. After a while, Pecker’s mother resists having her photo taken, remarking “some people don’t feel like being art”. Pecker likewise acknowledges he is being unwillingly transformed into a meaningless commodity, and decides that his next exhibition will be in Baltimore. The New Yorkers can come to Baltimore if they really want what he has to offer.

Enthusiastically, the New Yorkers attend Pecker’s show, but are shocked to see that they are the subjects of his exhibition. Pecker had taken unflattering photos of his New York benefactors, which exposes them as the facile, self-absorbed set they really are. But the opening turns into a big party and they all realise that very little separates the two worlds. It ends with Pecker’s father

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9 Perhaps this is a satirical reference to the Australian film Proof (Jocelyn Moorehouse, 1991), which stars Hugo Weaving as a blind photographer.
drinking a toast to “the end of irony”, which itself could be read as rather ironic. As Waters states, “irony is the drug I trade in [though] I’m a little weary of irony. Only because all popular culture is now completely based on it... Irony was fun when it was elitist. Now everyone gets the joke, so can it be a joke any more? I don’t know” (Waters cited in Smith, 1999).

Arguably, Pecker represents white trash aesthetics in rather affectionate terms. White trash aesthetics appeal to the postmodern in that it represents identity as marginalised and fractured; neither here nor there; sincere yet strangely savvy. White trash aesthetics appropriate varied forms in much the same way their own forms are appropriated by outside forces. One of these forms that often finds itself in combat with white trash is camp, and it is a style, aesthetic and sensibility that is everywhere evident in Pecker. Waters acknowledges this when he reminisces about how irony used to be fun when it was elitist. Camp is just this: an elite aesthetic that understands irony, but may appear slightly jaded by its own ironic leanings, because in a contemporary context, camp may not resemble its elitist origins. Waters’ films celebrate camp as much as they celebrate trash in all its varied forms: human trash, bodily excrement, or general garbage hijacked from the dumpster. Waters’ films are unequivocal filmic examples of camp/trash aesthetics.

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A deliberate ‘low’ form of camp refers to that which emphasises trash, excess, bad taste and frivolity, transforming aspects of low culture into something that pokes fun at the dominant culture and its preoccupation with so-called good taste. Camp delights in that which is considered out-dated, abject and dead.
Camp is constantly taking out the trash and recycling in a way that ironically reconstitutes the meanings of the object considered camp. The connoisseur of camp has a “trash imagination [and] understands that aesthetic pleasure can be found in diverse ways, including the marginalised and excluded” (Kleinhans, 1994: 189). Trash comprehends camp because camp itself is trash.

John Waters’ films can be associated with the category of low camp because there was a deliberate intention on the part of the filmmaker to shock and outrage audiences with satirical, ironic and grotesque images of trash. The trash in question refers to various things including white trash, black trash, trashed landscapes, human bodily waste, animal excrement, recycled trash fashions, in addition to the general clutter of garbage dumps and junkyards. Waters’ films fuse camp and trash, creating a unique camp/trash aesthetic that has been widely imitated in the U.S.\footnote{But I’m a Cheerleader (Jamie Babbit, 1999) is perhaps the most overt example of a film that imitates Waters’ camp/trash aesthetic because, aside from casting Mink Stole, the film’s camp production design pays homage to Pink Flamingos. The Farrelly Brothers’ films (There’s Something About Mary, 1998; Me Myself and Irene, 2000; Shallow Hal, 2001) use deliberate bad taste and shock value as the main ingredients of their comedies. While the Farrelly Brothers exhibit a “trash imagination”, their aesthetic is in no way camp.}

In the next chapter, the category of ‘queer’ will be examined as another facet of white trash identity. In many contexts, camp has been aligned with queer because both terms often (though not always) refer to gay male sexuality. Moe Meyer writes, “Because the function of camp ... is the production of queer social visibility, then the relationship between camp and queer identity can be posited” (1994: 5). The next chapter will take white trash away from the realm of camp and onto the highways of queer films from the 1990s and early 2000s. The former discussion of camp has not altogether been concerned with situating camp within a strict gay context, because the appeal of Waters’ and Elliott’s films has not necessarily been specific to gay—or camp—men. Chapter
4, however, will be more concerned with the way white trash can express queerness. The specific context of queerness as a site of sexual and social formation will be analysed in relation to the white trash films made under the rubric of New Queer Cinema.
The films analysed so far have been case studies that present whiteness as a relational entity that coexists with concepts of class and place. My analysis of whiteness has addressed the ways in which modes of whiteness instigate white trash, and how, in turn, white trash intersects with camp. If whiteness can produce white trash and camp, is it possible that white trash could effect a relationship with queer? Arguably, queer lends itself to white trash, and vice versa, because both categories often centre the subject. Whiteness is destabilised when forced to examine the incongruity of both its supposed supremacy and its ongoing nothingness. White trash dirties whiteness, rendering it unstable and decentralised. Camp valorises trash through irony, parody and more importantly, the reclamation of ‘low’ cultural forms. This chapter will discuss a number of films that represent queer white trash, with emphasis placed on the way queerness is continually represented in film as ‘movement’. The ability to move and a general resistance against standing still informs the production of the films analysed in this chapter. Moreover, these films represent queerness and white trashness in equal measure, making these films queer white trash texts.

My working definition of queer has been informed by one of the key figures of queer theory, Eve Sedgwick. In her book Tendencies (1994), Sedgwick frames ‘queer’ as a movement, not only in the sense that it refers to a community, collective, or even a cinematic movement, but because it moves in the literal sense. Sedgwick writes: “The word ‘queer’ itself means across... The
immemorial current that queer represents is antiseparatist as it is anti-
assimilationist. Keenly, it is relational and strange” (xii). Sedgwick’s definition
suggests that queer refers to being in flux, to be passing or moving across
sexualities, genders, desires and practices. The benefit of ‘queerness’ is that it
does not allude to the specificity of sex and gender, as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’
categories do. ‘Queer’ refers to both the subject (whether individual and
collective) and subjectivity (the practices and performances that may be queer).

Any definition of queer can prove to be a problematic exercise because it
is a term that has been defined in ways that counter Sedgwick’s definition.¹ For
my purposes, the slippery concept of queer is useful for examining a particular
moment in film’s recent history: New Queer Cinema. Of course, the usefulness
of queer is obvious because this wave of films, at least in the movement’s name,
embraced it head on.

I will not engage with the debates that surround the discipline of queer
theory, as they have been widely documented elsewhere. For the purposes of
this chapter, I wish to engage specifically with the production and consumption
of queer filmmaking practices, and how they relate to white trash. Sedgwick’s
definition of queer is deployed because it is useful in examining the queer
white trash characters discussed in this chapter. Sedgwick’s stress on queer’s
ability to move or pass across things, and remain in constant flux is evocative
because in New Queer Cinema, most of its subjects do not inhabit any one
specific place for too long; rather, they keep moving across the landscape,
forever passing through and between places, identities, things.

¹ Significant contributions to the always expanding arena of queer theory include
the term, De Lauretis abandoned it, writing “since I proposed it as a working
hypothesis for lesbian and gay studies in [Differences, 1991] it has very quickly become
a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry” (1994: 297).
In its formative years of the early 1990s, New Queer Cinema was identified by a handful of films, most of which were directed by gay men. Informed by a low-budget, independent aesthetic, New Queer Cinema made an impact because it presented a sometimes politically incorrect view of gay and (to a lesser degree) lesbian culture, one which had not previously been represented. Before New Queer Cinema, mainstream and even independent films featuring gay, lesbian or queer characters had often been a mixed affair, one which had either embarrassed, victimised or stereotyped queers. The advent of New Queer Cinema allowed queer life and culture a new platform, one noted for its autonomy, aggression and originality.

This dissertation has been foreshadowed by films that relate to New Queer Cinema. In Chapter 1, three contemporary films are presented as case studies of privileged whiteness, though only one, *Pleasantville*, is concerned exclusively with white heterosexuality. The other two examples, *Safe* and *American Psycho* are mostly about straight characters and narratives, but made by filmmakers whose early films are associated with New Queer Cinema. Film historian, Raymond Murray, regards *Safe* as “possibly the best work to come out of the much touted school of New Queer Cinema” (Murray, 1996: 65) which is ironic considering it is the least overtly queer film of the New Queer Cinema. *American Psycho* was directed by Mary Harron, whose first film *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996)—based on the life of radical lesbian feminist Valerie Solanis—was a high point in New Queer Cinema. Harron adapted her second feature *American Psycho* with Guinevere Turner, who previously co-wrote and acted in the New Queer highlight *Go Fish* (1994).² In *American Psycho* Harron

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² Turner has also acted in numerous other New Queer films including *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), *Latin Boys Go To Hell* (1997) and *Preaching to the Perverted* (1997). Turner has more recently developed a script with *American Psycho* director Mary Harron called *The Ballad of Bettie Page*. Based on the life of 1950's pin-up model Bettie Page, and
and Turner present a coolly detached view of the novel from which it was adapted, and frame the narrative within a revisionist framework that is informed by queer and feminist ideas. It is because of this queer/feminist framework that the film lends itself to being discussed as a text that calls into question ‘average’ white masculinity (see Chapter 1). While it might be misleading to dub *American Psycho* a product of New Queer Cinema, it certainly emerged from it.

The most notable films of the New Queer Cinema were road movies about young, free-floating, white trash characters who hustle their way through life. Much is made of the *queerness* of New Queer films but very little has been noted about the way much of its content is obsessed with white trash characters. The fact that the most interesting early examples of this movement were also road movies featuring white trash hustlers is certainly not accidental; if anything the persistence of the road motif supports the idea that the queer characters of these films were restless identities that could not be anchored in any one space.

In this chapter I will examine two of the earlier New Queer road movies *My Own Private Idaho* and *Postcards from America*, as well as two of the films to emerge out of this tradition, *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. The latter two examples are not necessarily road movies like the former examples, but they utilise the road as a key motif of movement, freedom, longing and escape.

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starring Turner as Page, the film is expected to be released in 2003. Turner says, “It has lesbian overtones because all the people Betty (sic) was photographed with were women. She was photographed by women. She was definitely not a lesbian, but she’s got girls spanking girls. I’m just dying to talk about Betty (sic) after it’s done, to see how people react to me playing this heterosexual sex symbol” (Ambramowitz, 1995).
From This Moment On: New Queer Cinema

New Queer Cinema emerged in the U.S. during the early 1990s, with a number of films from the U.K., Canada, Australia and Germany also being linked to this cinematic trend. The moniker 'New Queer Cinema' was coined by film critic B. Ruby Rich (1992) after viewing numerous gay and lesbian films at Sundance, Toronto and Amsterdam film festivals. In an attempt to describe this radically new and exciting form of cinema, Rich writes:

Of course, the new queer films and videos aren't all the same, and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it 'Homo Pomo': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches ... these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure (165-166).

Rich is referring primarily to independent queer films that were released between 1990-92: the "flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image" (Rich, 164).

Aside from Todd Haynes—whose first feature Poison had won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, 1991—the filmmakers that Rich associated with New Queer included everyone who presented a queer offering at any of the festivals she attended: Gregg Araki, Sadie Benning, John Greyson, Tom Kalin, Jennie

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3 Notable U.K. films include Sally Potter's Orlando (1993); Derek Jarman's Edward II (1991) and Wittgenstein (1993); Pratibha Parmar's Khush (1991); and Isaac Julien's Young Soul Rebels (1991). Notable Canadian films include Denys Arcand's Love and Human Remains (1993); John Greyson's Zero Patience (1993); Patricia Rozema's When Night is Falling (1994); and Bruce LaBruce's Super 8 1/2 (1994) and Hustler White (1996). Only one Australian filmmaker, Ana Kokkinos has produced work—Only the Brave (1994) and Head On, (1998)—that in my view fits with New Queer Cinema. German directors Monika Treut and Ulrike Ottinger have been linked with New Queer Cinema by media theorist Harry Benshoff. (www.orgs.unt.edu/ally/queerfilm.html)
Livingston and Laurie Lynd. Even though Benning and Livingston’s films were notable and influential inclusions in this wave of queer films, the evidence was clear: New Queer Cinema was dominated by male filmmakers. In the concluding paragraph of her *Sight and Sound* article Rich notes the lack of lesbian or black oriented content, a sentiment echoed by filmmaker Pratibha Parmar who writes: “The fact that a group of very talented white gay men are getting exposure and access to budgets is to be welcomed, but we also need to consider the difficulties, through gender inequality, of access to economic and marketing resources for lesbian film-makers” (1993: 174). It was because white gay men were the main producers of New Queer Cinema that many of these films were primarily about gay men. Haynes confirms this sense of exclusivity when he observes: “Sometimes I suspect that really what people are saying when they say ‘New Queer Cinema’ is ‘You should be making movies about cute guys, who have sex with other cute guys’” (cited in Jays, 1996: 71). While these criticisms are certainly valid, lesbian filmmakers like Cheryl Dunye, Maria Maggenti and Rose Troche emerged in the following three years after Rich’s formative essay on New Queer Cinema; non-white filmmakers like Gregg Araki, Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs also made significant contributions to New Queer Cinema during this period.

In addition to being about “cute guys who have sex with other cute guys”, the New Queer Cinema deployed discursive and contentious narratives, were stylistically daring and debunked existing stereotypes of lesbian and gay life. By emerging at this particular point in time, these filmmakers in effect either reinvented or dismissed past Hollywood representations of gays and
lesbians as sissies, deviants, home-wreckers, psychos, serial killers, manic depressives, substance abusers and so on.  

The New Queer pioneers were a timely group of cinematic bandits because they refused to settle for resolved, normative or stereotypical representations of queer life. Even though New Queer Cinema was grouped as a movement by critics and audiences, its actual content did not always unite in terms of a style, vision or politics. The only thing these films had in common was the way queerness was represented as movement. In other words, this film movement depended on queerness as movement, and the road was the key location where this was played out.

But the supposed radicality of the New Queer movement was not to last. In the latter part of the 1990s, New Queer Cinema was not what it once claimed to be. Many of its filmmakers had gone mainstream or abandoned their strict diet of queer content. In 2000, Rich published another essay on the topic, claiming that “the movement itself [is] in question, if not in total meltdown” because its independent origins were traded for the mainstream (Hillier, 2001: 114). Even though Rich uses the word “movement” to classify these films, she corrects herself in the next sentence by claiming that “New Queer Cinema was a more successful term for a moment than a movement” (114, emphasis added). While Sedgwick’s characterisation of queer emphasises its ability to move, Rich regards New Queer as belonging to a historical “moment” which has long since passed. A moment, by definition, refers to a short shelf life that cannot maintain

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4 Based on Vito Russo’s landmark book, the documentary The Celluloid Closet (Epstein and Friedman, 1995) analyses the history of gay and lesbian depictions in Hollywood films. The Celluloid Closet demonstrates how these problematic representations were both covert and explicit. Some key examples of Hollywood films to revel in negative stereotyping include: The Children’s Hour (1961), Boys in the Band (1970), Cruising (1980) and Making Love (1982). While some of these films, by simply representing queer characters, appear to have had the best of intentions, they were often poorly conceived films about gays and lesbians made by and for straight audiences.
itself beyond a marked period of time. It is for this reason that New Queer Cinema must be addressed in the past tense as a filmmaking tradition that no longer exists in the manner of its original form. Even though the moment of New Queer Cinema has technically passed, the distinct independent sensibility of the New Queer Cinema is still being echoed in some more recent white trash films like *Boys Don’t Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001). Why is it that New Queer Cinema frequently depicts white trash settings, characters and themes? White trash cinema corresponds and overlaps with the key tenets of New Queer Cinema because both rethink the relationship of race and class to queer subjectivity. New Queer Cinema was acclaimed for the way it represented queerness in autonomous and divergent terms. New Queer films about white trash demonstrate that, in some contexts, the trashing of whiteness is a rather queer thing.

Contemporary representations of queerness, like the ones depicted in New Queer Cinema, demonstrate the way identity and identification is never fixed. The New Queer Cinema exposes the way that queerness does not simply refer to sexuality; instead it refers to the connectedness of sexuality, gender, class, race, place, and so on. In the same way that queerness undermines normative and stable understandings of self, white trash exposes the way whiteness is not the clean, unmarked slate to which it lays claim. The key idea underpinning this dissertation is that whiteness is always trashed because the more it tries to maintain its self-appointed privilege, the more visible and marked it becomes. Off-whiteness/white trashness therefore, has an affinity with queerness because of the way queerness similarly decentres the subject. The queer white trash characters identified in this chapter highlight the way
cinematic depictions of queer subjectivity depend on concepts of race and class (which in this case are characterised as white trash).

*Boys Don’t Cry* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* are not necessarily the products of New Queer Cinema, but they do belong to a larger context of independent queer filmmaking that converges with depictions of white trash in cinema. This discussion will begin with an analysis of *My Own Private Idaho*, a landmark of New Queer Cinema that initiated the cinematic confluence between queerness and white trash identity.

**Asleep at the Wheel: *My Own Private Idaho***

Directed by Gus Van Sant (see Appendix 4.1), *My Own Private Idaho* is a road movie about white trash male hustlers. Mike Waters (River Phoenix) is a young narcoleptic hustler who drifts aimlessly around the streets of Portland, Oregon. Mike’s narcolepsy—a rare condition marked by an uncontrolled desire for sleep—is often triggered at times of stress, but mostly when he is reminded of his long-absent mother. Modelled on Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, from *Henry IV Part 1* and *Part II*, Scott Favor (Keanu Reeves), is also a hustler. Unlike Mike, Scott was born into a wealthy upper middle-class family. Scott’s father, the mayor of Portland, is dying and Scott stands to inherit the estate. Mike declares his love for Scott, but it is unrequited because for Scott, sex with men is strictly an economic affair. Scott is coded as a straight guy who will be queer for money, while Mike is queer white trash. Scott regards hustling as a temporary, rebellious measure, designed to upset his socially prominent father. Scott knows he will eventually abandon Mike and the hustling
community—including their Falstaff-like mentor Bob Pigeon (William Richert)—and return to a life of wealth, power and unwavering heterosexuality. Much of the film is concerned with Mike’s search for his mother, and is for this reason set on the road, zigzagging between Portland, Seattle, Idaho and, in a bizarre twist, Italy.

Van Sant represents his key character, Mike, as queer and white trash. Mike’s marginality works along these lines because his queerness is not only specific to his hustling, it has a lot to do with the way he desires Scott. Mike sees in Scott the same sense of comfort and safety that he associates with his long lost mother. Mike’s relationship to his ‘trade’, his friend and his absent family are all represented as queer because they pivot around themes of melancholic longing and desire. Mike’s white trash identity is emphasised primarily in the way his poverty contrasts Scott’s background of privilege. The road-trip Mike undertakes draws out the themes of longing and desire, but it also illustrates the way he will never, indeed can never, find what he is looking for. It is his queerness which enables a sense of movement (one that is in keeping with Sedgwick’s definition of queer). His white trashness also contributes to this sense of movement because his identity as a poor hustler ensures his ultimate inability to assimilate into the institutions of the dominant culture, namely, the family life he desires. It is the confluence of both queerness and white trashness which keep him marginal and in a perpetual cycle of irresolution.

But before I expand on the film’s white trashness, I will look at the way it is specifically queer. Aside from the fact that My Own Private Idaho is a leading text of New Queer Cinema, it is queer because it manipulates narrative structure and forcibly rejects linear models of storytelling for a structure that is
oneiric, blurring dream states and waking periods. The film is told from Mike's point of view, and because he is asleep for much of the film, his experiences of being both awake and asleep are indistinct. As a result, the film elicits a certain dreaminess, which is heightened by the inclusion of seemingly unrelated images that could be said to have emerged from Mike's unconscious.

Like most New Queer films, My Own Private Idaho 'queers' the logic of Hollywood narrative cinema. The structures of any narrative cinema, be it Hollywood or not, usually depend on the consummation of heterosexual imperatives in the quest for narrative closure. Thomas Waugh argues that narrative cinema is based on "the structures of sexual difference inherent in Western (hetero) patriarchal culture" (Lang, 331). Examples illustrating this point could include just about any romantic comedy, because this genre constantly defers sexual consummation, making it coincide with narrative closure.5

New Queer Cinema was differentiated from earlier models of gay and lesbian filmmaking because it attempted to reinvent approaches to narrative. Many of the New Queer films opted for experimental non-linear narrative structures. For example, Haynes' Poison consists of three different stories, that are linked in the sense that they all were all inspired by Genet's writings and shared similar themes of sexual transgression. But the film rejects linearity in favour of a story that unfolds through a series of narrative fragments. Like Haynes, Van Sant's use of structure owes much to his cultural influences. The

5 Specific examples include both of Nora Ephron's romantic comedy collaborations with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan: Sleepless in Seattle (1993) and You've Got Mail (1998). Ryan and Hanks play different characters in both films, but the similarity of both storylines suggest that narrative closure always requires the ultimate coming together of the male and female protagonists. It is interesting to note that Hanks' performance in Sleepless in Seattle should predate his role in Philadelphia by a few months (the former was released in June 1993, and the latter in December 1993). Narrative closure is provided in Philadelphia but only through the death of the gay hero.
structure of *My Own Private Idaho* draws upon the fragmented narrative style of William Burroughs, whose novels such as *Naked Lunch* (1959) are cut-up and random in structure. By cutting up the structure, Burroughs’ work depends on the intersection of varied levels of consciousness for meaning. Van Sant’s use of structure is further enhanced by a poetic visual language that pays homage to Jack Kerouac, a writer whose work has been celebrated for romanticising the American road trip and the American landscape.

The cut-up narrative of *My Own Private Idaho* is jarring because of the way images are often used to tell much of the story.⁶ Owing to the oneiric nature of the film, this emphasis on imagery imbues Mike’s character with an ambiguity more in keeping with the waking dreamland he appears to inhabit. These images often appear to be random, are consistently framed at odd angles, suggesting that Mike’s reality is slightly off-kilter and below surface.

An example of the juxtaposition of seemingly random images appears just after the opening credits sequence. Mike has fallen asleep on a road in Idaho. Cut to a shot of Mike’s face in close-up. At first it is unclear if he is still asleep, but transported to a different locale. The next shot (Figure 4.1) reveals the exact context: Mike is being blown by an off-screen john. A title card interrupts the sexual encounter, announcing Mike’s arrival in Portland. Cut back to Mike’s shoulder, neck and head thrust back in pleasure; the shot slightly off-balance and framed from above so that it appears as if a viewer were looking down on him. As a result, Mike appears to be floating; the slightly visible back of his chair is the one thing that keeps him from falling. In what appears to be a direct homage to Warhol’s early film *Blow Job* (1963; Figure 4.2),

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⁶ Before embarking on a career as a filmmaker, Van Sant studied painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. This training appears to have informed the way he often substitutes dialogue with the far more suggestive power of imagery.
the source of Mike’s pleasure is kept off-screen. As Mike reaches orgasm, a wooden farmhouse falls from the sky, landing on one of the lost highways of his unconscious.

Figure 4.1
A sexual encounter as a potential dream sequence for Mike (River Phoenix).

Figure 4.2
Warhol’s Blow Job denies the viewer visual access to the genital region.

Mike’s sexual encounter is edited so that it merges with the narcoleptic seizure he experiences in the opening scene; the narrative collusion of these two

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7 Warhol’s film aesthetic also subverts conventional film narrative. In contrast to a Burroughs-inspired assemblage of cut-up fragments, Warhol rarely uses cuts (or edits) in his early films. Blow Job, Empire (1963), Sleep (1963) and Couch (1964) are fixated on the action of one particular person, place or thing for their entire duration. The stationary camera, and absence of editing likens these films to moving paintings, a metaphor in keeping with Warhol’s training as a painter and graphic designer.
events produces an ambiguity whereby a viewer can never be totally anchored by what is real for Mike and what is dreamed. The disconcertingly surreal image of a farmhouse falling from the sky prepares a viewer for one of the key aspects of *My Own Private Idaho*: Mike’s search for a home. Moreover, the scene explicitly references the tornado from *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) that transports Dorothy to an entirely new, strange land. While the “yellow brick road” eventually leads Dorothy home, Mike’s hustling road-trip is less directional and secure, wracked instead with risk and looming heartbreak.

Even though *My Own Private Idaho* is primarily concerned with queer white trash hustlers, they cannot necessarily be categorised as ‘gay’. In an interview with Taubin, Van Sant questions the limitations of sexual labels when he states: “A person’s sexuality is so much more than just one word, ‘gay’. No one refers to anyone as just ‘hetero’ because that doesn’t say anything. Sexual identity is broader than a label” (Taubin, 2001: 80). On an immediate level, however, Scott appears to be straight because in one scene he says, “It’s when you start doing things for free, that you start to grow wings ... and become a fairy”. In the same interview, Van Sant describes how Mike’s sexuality was originally scripted as asexual, but River Phoenix deliberately played the character as if he were gay (84). While Mike appears to be gay—and even though Phoenix was said to have played him as gay—the film’s narrative never clearly identifies him as such. In a scene which takes place by the low light of a campfire, Mike confesses to Scott: “I love you, and you don’t pay me”. This scene reveals Mike’s queerness as something that is not necessarily specific to his hustling, while for Scott, queer sex is a temporary measure, designed to bring shame on his bourgeois family.
For both characters, queerness amounts to different things that do not always relate to sexual identity. Mike’s queerness refers to a range of things such as his search for family, home, love, and surviving life as a hustler. Taubin claims that Mike’s queerness is drawn out largely by the actor’s performance: “Phoenix fills the [campfire] moment with an absolute, naked need that blasts through easy tags of homo/hetero/bi” (2001: 82). The use of words like “naked need” suggest a desperation in (Phoenix’s performance of) Mike that renders him vulnerable. In other words, Mike’s queerness is linked to his sexuality, but encompasses his often thwarted desire for family, home and love. Scott’s queerness on the other hand, is represented as fleeting, inauthentic, and linked to a temporary rejection of family, home and love. If he had not decided to be a hustler who fucks men, his sexuality would probably not warrant discussion in a queer context. Scott’s version of queerness is one that keeps reinforcing the primacy of his straightness, evidenced by his distaste for the wings a fairy might grow. By the film’s end, Scott’s stab at queerness is forcibly rejected for an inherited life of wealth and privilege.

While Mike’s queerness may be linked to his hustling, the film remains ambiguous as to whether he is a hustler simply because of economic reasons. Perhaps he is a hustler because it fulfils other needs, such as the need for affection and the desire to be safe and in his mother’s care. It is for this reason that My Own Private Idaho could appear to pathologise homosexuality, because while the link between his ‘trade’ and search for love is not emphatically stated, it can nonetheless be made. Mike’s narcolepsy is always off-set by a memory of his mother, which again suggests a link between his condition and his past. During the search for his mother, Mike visits his brother Richard (James Russo), a violent alcoholic who eventually admits that Mike was born of incest; his
brother is also his father. Before revealing Mike’s incestuous origins, Richard
shows Mike the last postcard their mother had sent. It reveals, somewhat
ironically, that she had stayed at a hotel called The Family Tree (Figure 4.3).

Despite this tangled back story of incest and abandonment, I would
argue that Mike’s sexuality is not pathologised. While he is mostly preoccupied
with finding his mother, he is never represented as a victim of his
circumstances. During the campfire scene Mike says to Scott: “I didn’t have a
dog or a normal dad anyway ... I don’t feel sorry for myself. I mean, I feel like
I’m you know ... well-adjusted”. It would be simplistic to regard the inclusion
of incest as a white trash cliché in this context because Mike’s incestuous
parentage did not shape his queer white trash subjectivity; rather it was just
one of those things that was uncovered while searching for his mother.

![Figure 4.3](image)

The last noted address of Mike’s mother was a hotel called The Family Tree.

*My Own Private Idaho* is queer because it refuses a clear-cut identity
politics. In other words, the film embraces queerness as a way of avoiding the
propagandistic baggage that often attends cinematic representations of gay or
homosexual identity. *My Own Private Idaho* acknowledges queerness as being
linked to sexuality, but also having the power to shape other aspects of one's identity such as race and class. Mike's queerness is linked to his white trashness which produces a constant state of melancholic longing because he can never possess his ideals of family, home and love. His decentred identity forever renders him marginal, trapped in a circuit of longing and desire. As this film demonstrates, queer white trashness never offers the resolved narrative closure favoured by much mainstream cinema.

The life of a hustler or prostitute rarely lends itself to narrative closure, unless Julia Roberts and Richard Gere are involved. Queer can be aligned with sex in My Own Private Idaho through the figure of the hustler. But more importantly, the hustler has a specific relationship with the road and the street, something that again draws out the idea of queer as movement; queer as a perpetual and melancholic state of longing and searching. The representation of hustlers is a common theme in New Queer Cinema, and is used as a significant narrative trope in Postcards from America, Hustler White (Bruce LaBruce, 1996) and Johns (Scott Silver, 1996). The theme of hustling is significant to New Queer Cinema because it was controversial to represent images of social, sexual and economic desperation in a climate where queer filmmakers were expected to produce positive images. While not uncommon in cinema history, such subject matter is taboo in a “social climate marked by hysteria over AIDS” (Lang, 1997: 455).

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8 See Pretty Woman (Gary Marshall, 1990) for a heterosexual fairytale of a prostitute (Roberts) who is ultimately 'rescued' from the street by a rich, suavely romantic client (Gere).

9 The hustler is a recurring figure in Van Sant’s oeuvre: Van Sant produced Speedway Racer (Nickolas Perry, 1999), a film mostly about a group of young male hustlers. Van Sant announced in 2002 that he has begun developing a film adaptation of J.T. Leroy’s semi-autobiographical white trash novel Sarah, about a 12-year-old male prostitute who dresses as a girl to get tricks.

10 Examples of films about male hustlers include My Hustler (Andy Warhol, 1965), Midnight Cowboy (John Schlesinger, 1969).
As a hustler, Mike exists in the margins, outside of respected, normative employment, and beyond social institutions like marriage, family and so on. But even though his story is played out in the margins, he cannot be seen as totally removed from such social institutions because ultimately he longs for his mother and is searching for a family. This quest takes him out on the open road; one of the key spaces used to represent queerness in New Queer Cinema. The road, which functions as a major character in *My Own Private Idaho*, is the perfect place for queerness to emerge because it is analogous to the always thwarted promise of freedom that attends such open, expansive spaces. The rhetoric of post-Stonewall gay liberation can be paralleled to the freedom of the road because it is an antidote to the restrictive, demonised space of the closet. Being on the road implies being outside and visible, as opposed to inside a hidden, closeted space.

But the road is queer in *My Own Private Idaho* because it never takes Mike home; instead it continually reinforces his placelessness, his white trashness. The road offers potential resolution because surely the road must lead somewhere, it has to end at some point. For Mike the promise of something or someone being at the end of the road is not fulfilled. The road is alluring in its promise of leading home, and desired because it promises freedom. But while the road offers freedom in its ongoing movement, it also leads to a series of ‘dead ends’. By ‘dead end’ I am referring to the way a journey can be arrested by an unexpected, undesired turn. A ‘dead end’ is like being lost on a highway because one might be literally or metaphorically asleep at the wheel. At three points in the film Mike arrives at such a ‘dead end’. Having found himself on the same stretch of road, Mike realises his journey has not taken him to the places he desires. The road appears strangely familiar, a
road already travelled because it resembles a face. As Figure 4.4 and 4.5 illustrate, Mike personifies the road by framing his vision with his fingers to enable a selective view of the road ahead. Upon doing so, the road appears to him as a face, or as he calls it, “a fucked-up face”. The face of the road is fucked-up because it keeps returning, taunting him with a resolution that never comes.

Figure 4.4
Mike trains his eye on a section of the road ahead.

Figure 4.5
Upon doing so, the road becomes “a fucked-up face”.

It goes without saying that roads are used for movement, be it for a journey where one’s intentions are met, or a trip thwarted along the way. Queerness, likewise, stands for movement. In My Own Private Idaho, the road
acts as a key character and a motif of the film’s queerness. The road also assists in establishing Van Sant’s recurring theme of white trash marginality. New Queer Cinema depicts white trash characters who inhabit the margins of society. These margins are usually represented through the motif of the road. Whether it be an inner-city streetscape lined with young queer hustlers or the cross-country highways that symbolise escape, freedom and hope, the open-ended possibilities of the road are one of the most enduring representations of society’s margins. This open-endedness may be at odds with marginality, but in many ways it is a very queer thing when it refuses narrative resolution. In Mike’s experience, the road can taunt with its “fucked-up face”, forever keeping home at bay. Thus, when open-endedness reveals itself as queer, it can be likened to marginality.

The road, however, is not always marginal because it frames, in much the same way that it passes through, the landscape. It can be central, or distant, intersecting with other roads or none. The road can be a limitless romanticised passage or a frustrating series of dead ends. In their edited book of essays on the road movie genre, Cohan and Hark argue that “the road has always persisted in movies as an alternative space where isolation from the mainstream permits various transformative experiences, the majority of road films made before the 1960s more successfully imagined an ultimate reintegration of road travellers into the dominant culture” (1997: 5). For the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s, the road still functions as an “alternative space” and perhaps even “transformative”, but its travellers never integrate into the dominant cultural institutions like family, marriage, normative employment, and so on. Instead, it is up to these characters to forge their own queer white trash versions of family, marriage and, in a broader sense,
community. In many of the New Queer films, like *My Own Private Idaho* and *Postcards from America*, the road is spiked with potential danger, but it represents a lesser degree of danger than that which attends the supposed safety of the home.

In many of the films discussed in previous chapters (*Gummo*, *Lawn Dogs*, and even in the cinema of John Waters) white trash inhabits the rural edges of society. White trash is found far off the beaten track, so to speak. In much of the New Queer Cinema, white trash moves throughout the landscape, is on the road and on the run, even though in many cases the road leads nowhere. For Mike, the road offers escape, freedom and a passage home, but it also leaves him trapped in a perpetual circuit of searching for something which does not exist. Regardless of whether the road lives up to its promise of ‘something more’, the queer white trash characters of these films resist being anchored by any one particular place. This is an evocative concept because the project of queerness, by attempting to deconstruct binary logic, similarly resists being pinned down and categorised. Why was white trash identity often deployed in New Queer Cinema? And what is signified by the use of the road to represent queer white trash in these films?

In *My Own Private Idaho* the immediacy of the open road and the urban inner-city street functions in direct opposition to Mike’s ideal of home. Scott, on the other hand, has deliberately rejected the privilege of his home for a temporary street existence. The difference between the two characters is that

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11 I am using the words ‘something more’ with photo artist and filmmaker Tracey Moffatt in mind. Moffatt produced a now-famous series of photo works called *Something More* (1989) which similarly attest to the way the road offers an elusive ‘something more’, but is at the same time fraught with danger. In the first image, the key character (played by Moffatt) stares past the frame as if she is dreaming of ‘something more’ than her stylised rural environment. The last image climaxes with this character dead on a road which leads to the city of Brisbane (Queensland, Australia).
Scott's home is a place to which he can return. For Mike, the road home is a road that leads nowhere. The road never leads him home. The closest Mike gets to being in a “home” environment is upon reuniting with his brother Richard, but this encounter does not bring him any closer to the home for which he longs. Scott rejects home to spite his dying father, while Mike longs for home and the comfort of his absent mother. Mike and Scott's relationship is depicted as an impossible one, unable to sustain itself because of their dissimilar class identities. Their friendship is temporarily bound by a shared life on the street. In Figure 4.6 Mike and Scott enjoy each other's company in a café. The shot is photographed from the outside looking in so that the street, by being reflected on the window, appears to merge with their bodies. The distinction between outside and inside is blurred in this scene, detailing the importance of the street for their lives at that particular moment.

Figure 4.6
The street is reflected on Mike and Scott (Keanu Reeves, right), blurring distinctions of inside/outside.

Despite this shared existence on the street, Scott knows he will abandon Mike, in much the same way he will turn his back on his make-shift father figure, Bob. Scott's identity as a hustler is conceived as a phase which allows
him to visibly rebel against a class privilege that follows him wherever he goes. In other words, Scott is not white trash, even though the other hustlers are. It is Scott’s confidence, elegance, and ability to lead that makes him an object of desire, and a contrast to Mike’s queer white trashness. In keeping with the film’s allusions to *Henry IV Part I* and *Part II*, Scott is Prince Hal, destined to betray his friends when he takes his place on the throne. In a soliloquy, Scott admits that “it will impress them [his family] more when such a fuck-up turns good”. Scott associates the queer white trashness of hustling as the constituents of being “a fuck-up”, which contrasts the “good” that will come to him when he leaves his life on the street behind.

The streets of Portland and Seattle are used to emphasise the homelessness and marginality of its many queer white trash hustlers. These seamy urban streets contrast the open expansive roads of Idaho. The open road is an escape from the urban streets, because it brings Mike closer to his imagined ideal of home. In the last scene of the film, Mike stands on a sun-bleached Idaho road and says, “I’m a connoisseur of roads. I’ve been tasting roads my whole life. This road will never end. It probably goes all around the world”. The road certainly goes all the way around the film because the same Idaho road features in the opening and closing scenes. The road allows Mike to reflect on his relationship to his past, but we can never be sure if it is simply a journey of self-discovery. In a way, the Idaho road connects his memories with his peripatetic present.

It is fitting that Van Sant should select Idaho as the film’s titular location. While Idaho is located in the Northwest United States, it is represented in the film less as a real place, and more as a symbol of home and family. As Van Sant has said, the location is “both the literal Idaho of his early years and the utopian
Idaho of rooted love" (Lafrance: online). Idaho is the stuff of dreams for Mike, so it comes as no surprise that Idaho should trigger such frequent narcoleptic seizures, and that his dreamscapes be represented through such vivid, romanticised images. Van Sant uses Super 8 footage to signify memory, while Mike’s narcoleptic dream sequences often focus on the landscape in time-lapse cinematography. The latter technique beautifully illustrates the way these wide open spaces cradle Mike, often at the expense of time, which is represented as always evaporating.

The notion that Idaho symbolises home and family has been represented in film—and song—long before My Own Private Idaho.12 The initial inspiration for My Own Private Idaho came to Van Sant from The B-52’s song “Private Idaho” (1980). Strangely, Van Sant thanks The B-52’s in the film’s credits, but the song is not used, perhaps because its lyrics suggest a place altogether more menacing that Van Sant’s idea of Idaho:

You’re livin’ in your own Private Idaho/ You’re out of control/ The rivers that roll/ You fell into the water and down to Idaho/ Get out of that state/ Get out of that state you’re in/ You better beware.

The songs actually used on the film’s soundtrack romanticise the themes of home, the road and the American landscape. Examples include the iconic songs “Home on the Range” and “America, the Beautiful” which are used as instrumental arrangements. Taubin notes that these songs are so embedded in the collective American cultural psyche, that their inclusion allows “the viewer [to] silently sing along with the film” (2001: 83). In an ironic twist, the phrase

12 In a song called “My Idaho Home” that was written for Nashville (Robert Altman, 1975), Ronee Blakely sings the line, “I still love mom and dad best, my Idaho”.
"Homo on the Range" appears early in the film as the headlining caption to a porn magazine cover photo of Scott.

The search for a home recurs as an ambiguous theme in My Own Private Idaho, because it is enacted on a road that leads nowhere in particular. The logic of road films, which insist on closure, signified by a destination at the end of the road, is continually evaded in My Own Private Idaho. Rather than providing closure, the road "probably goes around the world". The image of the wooden farmhouse falling from the sky early in the film warns us that Mike's initial concept of the home as a domestic, comforting ideal will eventually shatter. As the wooden farmhouse splinters in this dream-like image, the emptiness of the house is revealed. Mike's idea of home is similarly empty and capable of crashing around him. As in The Wizard of Oz, Mike searches for a home like the wooden farmhouse because it represents a familial ideal. My Own Private Idaho is a 'friend of Dorothy's' in the respect that both road trips desire similar comforts of home. But while Dorothy's ideals are met, Mike's are always unattainable.

In addition to the wooden farmhouse in the opening sequence is a shot of salmon swimming upstream. This image may seem random, but it symbolises the quest for home because the salmon depicted naturally return to their birthplace to spawn another generation and die. Whether or not Mike produces another generation is entirely beside the point because his quest, his own private road-trip, has been more about renewal than reproduction, self-preservation than self-discovery. In light of that, My Own Private Idaho does reinforce a romantic ideal that the road offers freedom, at little or no cost for the white trash tumbleweed.13

13 Some of the dialogue from Gregg Araki's New Queer film The Living End (1992) satirises the romance of the American road trip. When hitchhiking, one of the film's
But is it a happy ending? We will never know, because the final scene sees Mike asleep on the road, dreaming. The only place where Mike does seem genuinely ‘happy’ and secure is in his dreams, evidenced by the recurring image of his mother within these dreams. The final scene is a long shot, which shows Mike being picked up by a stranger and driven away. Cut to the closing title card which reads “Have a nice day”. A comfortably resolved ending is shirked in favour of ambiguity. Queerness and white trashness never remain fixed parts of one’s identity, but in Mike’s case they are the only aspect of his selfhood that appears to be a guaranteed constant.

While the narrative remains ambiguous and open-ended, it cannot be said to end on a depressing note. Instead, its ambiguity is in keeping with the aims of New Queer Cinema which depicted marginal subjects and themes through unconventional narrative models. In her critique of *My Own Private Idaho*, Elizabeth Pincus argued that it’s “better to embrace marginality and its possibilities, harrowing and otherwise, for informing a cinema that resonates with more than just the facile palliative of happily-ever-after” (Pincus, web). But as film historian Robert Lang notes, “The queer road movies of the 1990s, more often than not, don’t have conventionally happy endings, but something has certainly changed for they cannot be called unhappy endings either” (1997: 333). It is because the melancholic desire of longing is emphasised in the film that it cannot be simplified in happy or unhappy terms; melancholy is neither sad nor happy. The fragmented, oniric narrative of unfulfilled longing makes *My Own Private Idaho* a queer white trash affair, less interested in sealing identity, than providing room for limitless meanings.

characters is asked where he is headed. When he says “wherever”, he is met with a sarcastic response: “Oh my, a romantic drifter, a lonesome cowboy hitching across the country like Jack Kerouac. How romantic. Isn’t that just fucking romantic”.
Disintegrating in the Landscape: *Postcards From America*

Directed by Steve McLean and produced by Christine Vachon (see Appendix 4.2) *Postcards from America* (1994) was released three years after *My Own Private Idaho*. The very first shot of Van Sant's film focuses on a dictionary definition of the word 'narcolepsy'; the definition is carefully illuminated to eliminate other information on the page. McLean appropriates this shot from *My Own Private Idaho* when, fifteen minutes into *Postcards From America*, a dictionary definition of the word 'fag' is depicted, similarly framed by a shaft of light. McLean, it seems, is aware that the journey represented in *Postcards From America* shares numerous parallels to the one depicted by Van Sant. An invisible (albeit postmodern) road links both films, in much the same way both films use actual roads to connect their various characters and narrative threads.

Like *My Own Private Idaho*, *Postcards From America* is a road movie featuring a non-linear, cut-up narrative. For Van Sant, the cut-up narrative is influenced by Burroughs, while McLean utilises a fragmented narrative form to heighten the experiences of alienation, confusion, rage and loss represented in the film. In *Postcards From America*, the road is not used as a means of mere transportation; rather, it doesn't really go anywhere, except that it connects the key character, David, to his past memories. The road charts and emphasises David's fragmented character. McLean achieves this sense of fragmentation by weaving three stages of the protagonist's life using three different actors to play each role.¹⁴ In the first, young David (Olmo Tighe) is an overweight boy,

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¹⁴ Structurally, *Postcards From America* is very similar to *Poison* because its story is based around three versions of the same character. In *Poison* Haynes weaves three separate but thematically linked stories that are based on Jean Genet's stories. Other links between both films is that Vachon produced both films; James Lyons acts in both films; and Haynes appears as an extra in *Postcards From America*.
growing up in a dysfunctional, abusive home in New Jersey during the early 1960s. Secondly, teenage David (Michael Tighe) is a petty thief and hustler, living in New York City during the 1970s. Lastly, adult David (James Lyons) is adrift in the South-western American desert during the late 1980s, engulfed by a sense of alienation, which forces him to reflect on painful memories. Although the film is not told in a conventionally linear form, the adult version of David remembers aspects of his past while on the open road, with the film beginning and ending at this same point in time.

While the fragmented structure employed in Postcards From America echoes the similarly fragmented existence of its protagonist, it serves another purpose, in that it is used to draw together selections from the biographical remains of David Wojnarowicz. Having established a reputation as a successful writer, painter and photographer in the mid-1980s New York art scene, Wojnarowicz's acclaimed career was cut short by his AIDS-related death in 1992. Even though Postcards From America is based on real events, the film could not be called a biopic, because it never emphasises the art historical gravity that is frequently attached to Wojnarowicz's life and work. 15 For example, art historian Donald Kuspit refers to Wojnarowicz as "the last Rimbaud" partly because he produced a series of self-portraits during the late 1970s where he wore a mask of Rimbaud's face, and because "Wojnarowicz ended—brought to an ambiguous populist conclusion—what Rimbaud begun: the idea of the artist as an experimental visionary" (Kuspit, 1988: online). Philosopher Felix Guattari regards Wojnarowicz's work in similarly revered terms: "The authenticity of his work on the imaginary plane is quite exceptional...What is important is that, through the concatenation of semiotic links he forges, he manages to

15 A biopic is a film adapted from the biographical or autobiographical sources of a real-life figure. These sources are abridged and modified in order to sit comfortably within the conventions of narrative cinema.
produce a singular message that allows us to perceive an enunciation in process; a singular vocation can thus be transferred on another plane” (Guattari, 1989: online).

Wojnarowicz is remembered particularly for the way his work always commented directly on his own life. When he was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988, Wojnarowicz’s work became increasingly political, fusing shards of his own biography with an ongoing commentary of rage directed at government and religious structures that attempt to silence marginal identities. Based on Wojnarowicz’s autobiographical books Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (1991) and Memories That Smell Like Gasoline (1992), Postcards From America completely evades Wojnarowicz’s life as an artist and activist, opting instead for a series of fragments set in motion by his seemingly aimless journey across the American desert. It is on the road, and in between sexual encounters in cars, trucks, and beats (locations where men engage in anonymous sex) that Wojnarowicz grapples with his own mortality. The vast American landscape is represented as an alienating and empty wasteland—a perfect match for a figure whose all-consuming emptiness produces his inevitable disintegration. The word “disintegration” is fitting here because Wojnarowicz uses the same word to describe his memoirs.

McLean’s version of Wojnarowicz never attempts to be a definitive portrait; obviously Wojnarowicz left behind a legacy of work that did a better job of being definitive. The version of David Wojnarowicz that McLean constructs in Postcards From America is a stylised simulation of real events, that transforms the historical figure, David Wojnarowicz, into a queer white trash
archetype. Never once is his last name mentioned in the film. It is not until the end of the film that a title card announces the writings of which the film is based. *Postcards From America* is based solely on Wojnarowicz’s biographical accounts, which is perhaps one of the reasons it never includes any of his plastic arts. McLean does, however, represent the American landscape in a way that echoes the photographs Wojnarowicz took while on his own personal road trip in the late 1980s. The film is not in black and white, but it does capture the same poetic evocations of sadness, rage, alienation and loss, captured in Wojnarowicz’s black and white photographs.

For example, in one of his most famous photographs, *Untitled (Buffalo Falling)* (1988-89; Figure 4.7) Wojnarowicz depicts a scene framed by a vast desert landscape in which a herd of buffalo fall from a cliff to their death. Its overwhelming sadness and strange beauty encapsulates the metaphoric nature of Wojnarowicz’s work, because it can be read as analogous to his own despair, and feelings of mortality. In *Untitled* (1991; Figure 4.8) Wojnarowicz more directly aligns his own identity with the landscape. Cropped tightly around his own head, which is partly buried in the ground, Wojnarowicz captures the importance of the road and the American landscape to his life and work, while simultaneously presenting an image of his own death.

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16 In this text I will make the distinction between the historical figure and McLean’s representation, by referring to the film character as “David” and the real-life artist by his last name “Wojnarowicz”.

17 Copyright issues or legal matters to do with dead artist’s estates can often prohibit filmmakers from using artist’s work on screen. While *Postcards From America* solves this problem by not representing Wojnarowicz’s life as an artist, an example of a more conventional biopic that was met with similar problems is the film based on Francis Bacon’s life, *Love is the Devil* (John Maybury, 1998). In this film, Maybury could not use any of Bacon’s work, but attempted instead, to evoke his style, themes and subject matter through the production design and cinematography.
Having established a brief synopsis of both *Postcards From America* and the artist on whose life the film is based, I will now focus on how queerness and white trash identity is represented in this film. David’s queerness is represented as having emerged when he was a child. As Sedgwick has said, “queer kids are queer before they’re gay—if indeed they turn out gay at all” (1996: 137, emphasis in original). According to the film, David’s sexual awakening is experienced when he is approximately nine or ten years old. In one scene, David is seen with a nineteen-year old boy who is tied by his wrists to a tree in a run down
dwelling in the woods (Figure 4.9). David looks on with what appears to be a paralysed curiosity; he just sits and stares at the older boy. The boy pleads for David to masturbate him to which David responds, aided by a handful of insulation. A still image is inserted into the action to allude to David's fantasy that the boy is St. Sebastian, speared in the side with an arrow (Figure 4.10). The image, which is lurid in colour and suggestive of a dreamscape, is a reference to Pierre et Gilles' photographic portraits, which transform their

Figure 4.9
The older boy tied to a tree is one of David's first propositions for sex.

Figure 4.10
A fantasy of St Sebastian inserted into the action recalls the work of Pierre et Giles, Todd Haynes' *Poison* and Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane*. 
queer subjects into saints. It also makes explicit reference to the homoerotic prison story from Todd Haynes' *Poison*, and to Derek Jarman's film *Sebastiane* (1976), where the martyr saint is represented as a queer icon.

David's emerging queerness is represented as a desire to retreat into his own world, far removed from his father's abusive hand. It is for this reason that *Postcards From America*—like *My Own Private Idaho*—does not shy away from making a link between a tormented, abused childhood and homosexuality. As Stephen Holden wrote in *The New York Times*, *Postcards from America* "makes a heavy-handed Freudian equation between the beatings Wojnarowicz endured at the hands of his father and his cruising for rough trade at truck stops and on the road" (Holden cited in Lang, 1997: 330). This "equation" does not go unnoticed because, in addition to the psychological and physical abuse, David's father (Michael Ringer) accuses his mother (Maggie Low) of "turning the kid into a fuckin' homo". I would argue that it is not entirely constructive to dwell on the link between David's abused past and queer adulthood, because the life he leads as a nomadic hustler is not made out to be a pathologised existence. As I stated earlier in my analysis of *My Own Private Idaho*, a key characteristic of New Queer Cinema is the resistance to producing images, narratives and ideas that propagandise queerness.

The link between violence and homosexuality is represented in one scene, perhaps one to which Holden's criticism refers. Young David stares at television set, imagining that he is on TV, entering a large white suburban house. Once inside, an adult couple who are his projected fantasy of ideal parents, welcome him. The scene is narrated by adult David in a voice-over:

In my dreams, I enter your house through the cracks in the bricks that keep you feeling comfortable and safe... I wake you up and tell you a story about when I
was ten years old and walking around Times Square looking for the weight of a man to lie across me; to replace the non-existent hugs from Mom and Dad.

The voice-over continues by describing a man who solicits David for sex, but beats him afterwards in a fit of homosexual panic. In a quick change of tone from fantasy to nightmare, the couple from the big white house stand sternly, guarding their closed front door. The camera, which registers as David’s point of view, slowly pans away from their unwelcoming glares. The voice-over concludes by stating, “I’ll wake you up and welcome you to your bad dream”. While David’s search for affection (which leads to hustling in Times Square) is explicitly stated as a desire to “replace the non-existent hugs from Mom and Dad”, the scene critiques the fantasy of perfect middle America, popular in sitcoms from the 1950s and ’60s, like Leave it to Beaver. Below the surface of what appears to be a perfect, suburban middle class existence is a nightmarish current. A less-confrontational variation of this idea is, of course, explored at greater length in Pleasantville when Tobey Maguire’s character is obsessed with a retro sitcom, because its represents an idealised version of the American nuclear family, a stark contrast to his own unhappy home environment.

This scene in Postcards From America illustrates the way in which the protagonist’s identity oscillates between dream and reality. Like Mike Waters, whose narcolepsy is signified through My Own Private Idaho’s oneiric structure, David inhabits a series of spaces that are not always concrete. Dreams, fantasies and memories punctuate the film, keeping David’s sense of reality unstable and certainly not grounded in the present tense. His identity, therefore, is informed by a fragmented, decentred view of the world which sees the selective experiences of the everyday as interchangeable and blurred.
In much of the childhood reminiscences, the tenuous link between beauty and pain is signified by the use of nostalgic and melancholic country songs by Connie Francis. McLean emphasises the way that such music is often the stuff of childhood memories. The melancholic nature of country music works in the context of memory, because many of David’s childhood memories are sad and sweet, traumatic and tender. At one point in the film, a Connie Francis song is used to bridge David’s childhood and teen years.\textsuperscript{18} In the former scene he is swimming alone in a lake, having escaped the confines of his oppressive house. The song continues into the next scene, where David is a teenager, hustling in Times Square. One line from the chorus, “I find a broken heart among my souvenirs”, adds country-styled pathos primarily because, even though David is not represented in melodramatic, broken-hearted terms, it suggests that he is a tourist of sorts. Drifting through life, David collects experiences like souvenirs. The title of the film also suggests that David’s experiences are like postcards containing fragments of information that are mostly narrated in the past-tense of memory. As discussed in Chapter 2, early forms of country music had a special affinity with white trash people, and filmmakers often rely on country music to aurally signify white trashiness. In Postcards From America, David’s white trash upbringing is remembered with a degree of affection when framed by the songs of Connie Francis.

In all three interweaving sections of the film, domestic spaces are depicted as memory. Specifically these spaces are cluttered, menacing and

\textsuperscript{18} On 11 March 2002, eight years after the film was released, Connie Francis filed a $40-million lawsuit against Universal Music Corp, which licensed the use of her songs in allegedly pornographic films. As reported by the Internet Movie Database, “She particularly objected to the use of four of her songs in the unrated film Postcards From America … Francis describe it as a ‘vile, pornographic’ movie in her lawsuit. Francis’ attorney said that when she learned of the use of her songs in such films, she became particularly distressed given her fragile mental health resulting from a 1974 incident in which she was raped and tortured in a hotel room”. (IMDb, News for 12 March 2002, us.imdb.com/SB720020312#3).
claustrophobic locales that contrast the freedom of open spaces. As I argued earlier in this chapter, *My Own Private Idaho* represents queer white trash as an identity that inhabits the margins of society. Although Mike Waters longs for home and family, the road ultimately never leads him there. In *Postcards From America*, David is represented as inhabiting the liberating, yet undeniably lonesome landscape, because it is a substitute for an abusive home life which had threatened to destroy him. While interior spaces are represented as menacing and claustrophobic, they appear as highly constructed spaces that belong to the psychic or symbolic realm of memory and the ‘myth’ of the family.

For example, all the rooms of David’s childhood home in New Jersey are encased in shadows, which make the space appear distant and uninviting.\(^{19}\) Because the scenes are represented as fragments of a scarred, selective memory, they are presented in a manner that likens the action to stage drama. In one scene where David’s parents are fighting with each other in the background soundstage, the camera slowly pans around them, encircling the action. David stands still in the foreground, his hands blocking his ears (Figure 4.11). The panning camera motion resembles a rear projection because David remains fixed to the spot while his parents slowly orbit in the background. The unsettling effect of a scene such as this is enhanced by the way much of the dialogue is delivered in monologue, a technique used intermittently throughout the entire film. Occasionally the actors direct their dialogue at the

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19 In his review of the film, Robert Horton notes that “all the rooms disappear into black devouring shadows, like a film noir version of ‘Father Knows Best’”. He continues by contrasting the film to Haynes’ *Poison*: “You get the impression that McLean, like, say, Todd Haynes, is well versed in those appalling/ hiliarious ‘Social Guidance’ films of Eisenhower-era... [U]nlike Haynes, McLean doesn’t couch his response in the safety of camp, but goes directly to the nightmare reverse image”. [film.com/film-review/1994/9262/18/default-review.html](http://film.com/film-review/1994/9262/18/default-review.html)
camera/imagined audience, which again likens it to stage drama.\textsuperscript{20} Memory is theatricalised and detached in \textit{Postcards From America}, which serves as an appropriate technique because the road is used to connect David to the landscape, far away from the memory of his abusive past. Though he attempts to be free in this wandering, peripatetic sense, he is, paradoxically, haunted and trapped by his own memories. In contrast, \textit{My Own Private Idaho} depicts memory through the narcoleptic respite of Mike's comforting, nostalgic home movies.

Figure 4.11

David's parents fight on a pivoting, claustrophobic soundstage, while he remains fixed to the spot.

Whenever David is depicted in a domestic space, the interiors are overly cluttered and engulfing, and represented by the repeated use of medium or

\textsuperscript{20} The technique of directly addressing the camera is rarely used in conventional narrative cinema because it interrupts the flow of action and subverts spectatorial expectations. Other queer films from the 1990s, such as \textit{Orlando} (1993) and \textit{Jeffrey} (1995) engaged this technique to varying levels of success. The Australian film \textit{The Sum of Us} (1994), which is perhaps less queer than the other two examples because of its normative representation of gay male sexuality, also uses this technique. Interestingly, \textit{Jeffrey} and \textit{The Sum of Us} were originally stage plays.
close-up shots. In contrast, medium and long shots are often used to depict David’s relationship to the American landscape through which he is passing (Figure 4.12). The scenes that emphasise this occur at the beginning and end of the film, when David is coming to terms with the knowledge that he has contracted the HIV virus. The first words uttered out loud by David acknowledge this directly: “There’s something in my body, it’s trying to fucking kill me”. McLean contextualises this crisis by repeatedly depicting David in relation to the liberating (or perhaps healing) space of the landscape, because it contrasts the dangerously engulfing nature of interior spaces.

![Figure 4.12](image)

Adult David (James Lyons) is repeatedly framed by the landscape through which he passes.

In my analysis of Safe (Chapter 1), I argued that Carol White—whose plight is subtextually constructed as an AIDS narrative—is always depicted in long or medium shots because it keeps a viewer detached from her crisis, while simultaneously depicting Carol’s growing detachment to her so-called toxic

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21 Producer Christine Vachon stated that she often encourages filmmakers who have limited budgets to use close-ups because it is “easier and cheaper to light small spaces than it is to light big ones” (Vachon, 1998: 21). Vachon does not specifically state whether this was the case when producing Postcards From America, but she says the intimacy produced by many of the close-ups in a film like Swoon (Tom Kalin, 1992) was mostly an “aesthetic decision” but also, inevitably, an economic reality.
environment. In *Safe*, which was made a year after *Postcards From America*, Carol is framed in this manner because it keeps her at a 'safe' distance, rendering her small and insignificant (see Figure 1.6). David, on the other hand, is often framed so that the landscape protects him, because it is a largely a means of escape.

The open road is often represented in road movies as a space for marginal identities, because it appeals to the idea, or even myth, that one can exist outside of culture. To be *outside* of something, however, inevitably invokes that which may be on the *inside*. Diana Fuss challenges this dichotomy, and its relation to the hetero/homo binary in her edited collection of essays *Inside/Out*. The key tenet of Fuss' argument is that homosexuality is always figured as the outside term because it is excluded or marginalised by heterosexuality. But being outside can also mean being inside because being on the outside “is really to be in”—inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible” (4). If Fuss’ argument is taken into account, the supposed outsider status generated by being queer white trash does not necessarily guarantee radicality, because it is perhaps impossible to fully inhabit the excluded domain of outsideness.

In *Postcards From America* David is represented as an outsider. The real David Wojnarowicz was similarly embraced as an artist because his work was paradigmatic of an outsider aesthetic or sensibility. It is not necessarily the queer white trashness which automatically guarantees this in the film. Instead, it is David’s engagement with the road that suggests his free-floating outsider status. Moreover, the very act of passing or “speeding” through the landscape becomes the key metaphor for the attempts he makes to transcend himself.
through sex. The relationship between “speeding” and sex is depicted in the first scene of the film. In a voice-over David says:

Speeding: It’s the only emotion that makes the heart unravel. I don’t like highways very much but I love to speed. It makes me think of men’s bodies, and driving, and drifting; the sway; the dance of sex; like a dream. I like to speed.  

This voice-over is followed by an image of David screaming, while standing within the desert landscape. The camera pirouettes around him, slowly gaining momentum until it is speeding out of control, painting the landscape as a dizzy blur. The scene abruptly ends with a close up shot of David screaming which contrasts the medium and long shots used to depict his relationship to the landscape. In Figure 4.13, David is depicted screaming, and the landscape is a distant, indefinable shape to which he does not seem connected. It is the accumulative association of such acts as speeding, unravelling, driving, drifting, swaying, dancing and fucking that point to his attempts to transcend the body, to leave its disintegrating interiority behind, and be outside of it. Of course, the body is utilised in the acts described, but it is through speed-induced abandon, emphasised by the swirling movement of the camera, that David comes to exist outside of himself. This sense of disembodiment is depicted when (the adult version of) David is engaged in an anonymous public sexual encounters, primarily because these scenes often trigger childhood memories.

22 Although he states a disregard for highways, he accepts the confines of cars which speed across roads and through landscapes, largely because the experience is a sexual one. As Wojnarowicz writes in Close to the Knives, “Driving a machine through the days and nights of the empty and pressured landscape eroticizes the whole world fitting in through the twin apertures of the eyes” (1991: 26).
A close-up shot of David screaming renders the landscape a distant entity, contrasting the way it frames his face and upper torso in Figure 4.12.

*Postcards From America* represents a specific story or narrative primarily inflected with an intersection of three identity categories: sexuality, class and race. In most reviews of the film, and indeed in critiques of Wojnarowicz’s real-life work, little attention is paid to issues of class and race, or a term like “white trash” which unites both terms. Instead, it is his queerness that is more often than not claimed as the definitive speaking position from which the film, or Wojnarowicz’s work, speaks. Another reason why queerness could run the risk of being privileged above class and race in the context of *Postcards From America*, is because it belongs to the New Queer Cinema—a film movement that is, above all, queer. *Postcards From America* is based on Wojnarowicz’s confessional memoirs which detail the way his queer identity was often met with homophobic resistance, and the way his upbringing was rooted in a working class struggle, which led to him living as a homeless teenage hustler on the streets of New York City.

In her essay on the “Queer White Trash” stories of Dorothy Allison, cultural critic Jillian Sandell argues that confessional storytelling is a popular

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23 Articles which focus on the sexuality of Wojnarowicz’s work include: Harrison (1995); Mandell (1999) and Smith (2002).
and sometimes powerful tool in contemporary culture because, these stories, “when told, are presumed to enable and foster the creation of social and political communities” (1997: 211). While a proliferation of confessional stories continue to emerge in today’s cultural climate, Sandell notes that “there are still certain stories which cannot be told—either because we have no language with which to articulate them or because there is no interpretive community to hear and understand them” (1997: 212, emphasis in original). The one story which cannot be told, for Sandell, is the story of class struggle in white American culture. The existence of white trashness as an archetype or lived reality emphasises a growing awareness of issues to do with class. But these white trash tropes often flourish within the fabric of American cultural consciousness as an object of derision, lacking autonomy, subjectivity and human characteristics. For example, white trash is often represented in contemporary cinema as humorous (think O Brother, Where Art Thou?) and grotesque (think Gummo) or both (as in John Waters’ films). Narratives of class struggle are certainly articulated within contemporary culture, but they often become commodified and, therefore, mystified.

As I argued in Chapter 1, representations of whiteness rarely challenge or acknowledge the privileged meanings embedded in the very ‘make-up’ of white identity. White trash, alternatively, is unable to exist without being aware of its class status, its trashness. But once it becomes part of a collective cultural experience—often simply because of the accumulation of white trash representations, stories and experiences—that white trash runs the risk of being turned into a mere commodity. As Sandell writes, “Issues of economic marginality can be tolerated and articulated within the logic of liberal pluralism, so long as they can be circulated as cultural, rather than economic
issues" (1997: 213). When the markers of identity become cultural signs, they are inevitably commodified. One of the main reasons why class narratives are often taken for granted or overlooked, is because other identity markers lend themselves to commodification. New Queer Cinema is named as a queer product, which means it can be categorised based on its queerness. Paradoxical as this categorisation may seem, given that queerness resists being categorised, the queerness of New Queer Cinema is culturally intelligible. Likewise, white trash stories do eventually become commodities, but it often occurs with lashings of cynical humour or grotesquery, which makes it difficult at times to recognise, or take seriously, the multiplicity of white trash narratives.

As leading texts of the New Queer Cinema, *My Own Private Idaho* and *Postcards From America* represent, to varying extents, queerness in relation to white trash identity. But it is because they do not refer to their subjects within a humorous or grotesque context that their subject’s white trashness can be overlooked or rendered only queer, because in these instances the leading protagonists are hustlers: men who trade in sex. It is not enough to suggest that these characters are only queer. Indeed they are queer characters, but their white trashness is just as important to the way they have been constructed on screen. David describes his earliest hustling encounter as his “first lesson is American-style economics”, which suggests that sexuality and class are interchangeable and linked. The specific economic conditions of the characters in both *Postcards From America* and *My Own Private Idaho* are often positioned within the realm of queerness rather than a specific context of white trashness. Does that mean then, that all aspects of identity are queered in New Queer Cinema simply because this film movement is noted more for its queerness than for its depictions of class and race?
Certainly, these films depict identity as open-ended, and sexuality is largely responsible for the way these characters are interpreted. But often it is the difficulty in identifying or naming these characters and narratives within the context of white trashness that points to the problem of white trash representations. This ‘problem’ is very specific to cinematic representations of white trash because, as stated earlier, a series of tropes exist which serve to limit depictions of white trashness within a particular framework of oppression. This may be the way it can be grotesque and lampooned; even when white trash is transformed into an object of queer desire—eroticised by virtue of being an exotic outsider—it can be trivialised because of the implication that white trash embodies a fiercely aggressive sexuality that is ‘raw’, ‘primitive, ‘uncivilised’, and ‘uncultivated’. As myth would have it, dirty whites engage in dirty sex. The remaining examples, discussed in this chapter (Boys Don’t Cry and Hedwig and the Angry Inch) represent sex, not necessarily as a dirty deed, but it is certainly a point of difference, particularly in the way both films employ themes of white trash transgenderism.

White Trash Wall People:

Boys Don’t Cry & Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Produced by Christine Vachon’s Killer Films and directed by first time filmmaker Kimberly Peirce, Boys Don’t Cry engages with the tropes of trash in equal measure to the tropes of queer. Boys Don’t Cry is an adaptation of the real-life story of a poor, white, queer, biological female called Teena Brandon who changed ‘her’ name to Brandon Teena and lived passing as a boy in Nebraska. Brandon (who is played by Hilary Swank) was always on the run
from the law because of the petty crimes he committed during his short life. However, most of the ‘crimes’ depicted on screen are crimes against sexual normativity. When Brandon was revealed to be biologically female by his redneck friends in late 1993, he was gang raped and murdered.

Film critic Xan Brooks notes that trash and queer collide in Boys Don’t Cry because it “filters its true crime material through the prism of New Queer Cinema” (Brooks, 2000: cited online). It is the film’s representation of crime—most of which emerges in the comparisons it invites to films about white trash criminals like Badlands, In Cold Blood and The Executioner’s Song—that makes it a white trash classic.\textsuperscript{24} The difference here is that Brandon meets his tragic demise because the one crime he committed was a crime of performance, the crime of passing as a boy, when his anatomy was female. For this reason, Boys Don’t Cry engages with notions of queerness on a very complex level, because Brandon’s gender is performed, artificial, constructed. The film demonstrates—like many others which utilise transgender themes—that gender and sex are forever unstable, inauthentic and disruptive because they are not inherent or essential components of identity.\textsuperscript{25}

Also produced by Killer Films, the musical comedy Hedwig and the Angry Inch similarly explores the instability of gender and sex through a white trash narrative. The character Hedwig (John Cameron Mitchell) is an identity divided. The metaphor of division functions throughout the entire film, beginning with the Berlin Wall, which was still intact, oppressively dividing

\textsuperscript{24} Badlands (Terrence Malick, 1973), is based on the Starkweather/Fugate killing spree of the 1950s. Adapted from Truman Capote’s famous book, In Cold Blood (Richard Brooks, 1967) is based on the real-life murder of a Kansas farming family. Based on Norman Mailer’s book on real-life criminal Gary Gilmore, The Executioner’s Song was directed by Lawrence Schiller (1982).
East and West Germany. Hedwig’s life begins in East Berlin as a boy named Hansel, who longs for the freedom implied by the heavy dose of American pop culture, on which he was raised. Upon meeting a Black American “Sugar Daddy” named Luther (Maurice Dean Wint), who lures him with candy, marriage and the promise of a better life in America, Hansel becomes Hedwig after an unsuccessful sex change operation which leaves him with an “angry inch” of flesh substituting for what was once his penis. Hedwig and Luther move to a trailer park in Kansas City, and within a year Hedwig is dumped for a much younger white American man. For Hedwig, living in a trailer park was “the lowest point in my life”. To make matters worse, it is during this “low point” that Hedwig watches the televised collapse of the Berlin Wall, realising that she could have left Berlin with her genitals and dignity intact, had she only waited a year. Like the road-trips of longing and desire employed by the protagonists of My Own Private Idaho and Postcards From America, Hedwig’s journey is one wracked with disappointment and heartbreak.

For example, Hedwig is on a journey to find her other half, a person who will complement, complete, and render her whole. Recurring animations by artist Emily Hubley punctuate the film depicting dual forms that become one through various acts of incorporation: spooning, fucking, being swallowed whole, and so on. The basis for Hedwig’s philosophy of sexual oneness derives from the origin myth detailed in Plato’s Symposium, which writer, director and actor John Cameron Mitchell describes as “a particularly Western myth, Plato is the beginning of Western culture, really. And Socrates is a character in Plato’s Symposium... The myth was picked up by the Gnostic Christians, who were really into this idea of the doppelganger and the ‘other half’, being someone or something that has information you don’t have” (Fuchs, 2001: online).
Like the film’s historic backdrop of the Berlin Wall, Hedwig is symbolic of division—she literally becomes the Berlin Wall. In the first musical number, “Tear Me Down”, Hedwig appears on stage, and begins her performance by proclaiming, “Don’t you know me Kansas City, I’m the new Berlin Wall”. Hedwig raises her arms, revealing a cape which is a representation of the Berlin Wall (Figure 4.14). Later in the song, Hedwig’s new husband and bandmate, Yitzhak (a male character played by actress Miriam Shor) sings:

Ladies and gentlemen/Hedwig is like that wall/Standing before you in a divide between East and West/Slavery and freedom/Man and woman/Top and bottom/And you can try and tear her down.

As the “new Berlin Wall”, Hedwig symbolises the divisions between self and other, as well as numerous other binary oppositions to do with gender, sexuality, class, race and location. Boys Don’t Cry also represents social division through the metaphor of the wall. Many of the supporting characters in the film are referred to as “wall people”: bored white trash kids who congregate against the wall at the Qwik Stop convenience store all night long. Based on a real-life subculture in Falls City, Nebraska, Peirce discovered that “wall people” generally hung out together in such locations because it was there that they could consume alcohol and get high on glue and aerosol cans, items often stolen from the convenience store. When bored of the “wall”, other forms of entertainment includes karaoke, bumper-skiing and car chases, all of which are depicted in the film. The focus on the “wall people” heightens the sense of small town entrapment, while also contrasting Brandon’s ability to move from place to place. Of course, Brandon frequently moves around because he is on the run from the law. But it is in Falls City that he wants to settle, having fallen
in love with Lana Tisdell (Chloë Sevigny, who also played a white trash character in Gummo). Lana is disaffected most of the time. Numb from alcohol and her soulless factory job, Lana lives with her alcoholic mother in what she calls a “stupid house”.

![Image](image)

Figure 4.14
Hedwig as “the new Berlin Wall”. The graffiti reads: “Yankees Go Home ... With Me”.

It is at the Qwik Stop that Brandon and Lana first speak. Lana is high the whole time, wandering around aimlessly until Brandon walks her home. The “wall people” of Boys Don’t Cry are alienated from and by the smallness of the town in which they live. They are attracted to the location of the wall for no other reason than it is one of few places where they can go for fun. When Brandon arrives in town, he represents freedom and potential escape for the numerous young women he meets. Apart from the obvious signifier of the cowboy hat, Brandon adopts a very exaggerated cowboy-style masculinity that is assertive and fearless, while simultaneously sensitive and romantic. Brandon may as well have modelled himself on John Wayne. One of Brandon’s killers, Tom (Brandon Sexton III), sees through Brandon’s cowboy act, claiming he
rode into Falls City on a “pussy-whipped faggot horse”. (I will return to Brandon’s cowboy-style later).

At the beginning of the film, a young girl at a roller-skating rink says to Brandon, “You don’t seem like you’re from around here”. Brandon asks her where she thinks he might be from, to which she replies, “Some place beautiful”. From all appearances, Brandon comes from a place that is not small, a place of opportunity, a place where dreams come true. He represents all that is free, exotic and beautiful. Even Lana’s mother refers to Brandon as “a little movie star”.

Despite the fact that Brandon presented this image, he was a compulsive liar who had only come from a neighbouring Nebraskan city, Lincoln. As Nebraska’s capital city, Lincoln is much bigger than Falls City, but for Brandon, Lincoln was a hostile place. It was in Lincoln that Brandon had repeatedly been in trouble with the law or the target of numerous attacks when his biological sex as a woman was revealed. In contrast, Falls City offered Brandon a sense of acceptance within his new-found community of friends. Ultimately, this acceptance is only unconditional for Lana. The attack which culminates in Brandon’s tragic death was the result of the very thing he was trying to escape in Lincoln.

Again, the road functions in this film as a site of escape—a means of being able to drift throughout life. Like the other films analysed in this chapter, Brandon’s journey is also about longing and searching. Specifically, he is looking for acceptance, community and love. But Brandon’s search for these things is almost always offset upon escaping from troubling situations.

One of the key aspects of this chapter, has been the way the queer white trash is aligned with the road. The internal contradictions of white trash—being
white yet marked—are similar to the contradictions offered by the road, in the sense that the road signifies freedom and escape on the one hand, because it brings about the ongoing need for self-transformation. On the other hand, the road offers a sense of alienation and danger because, depending on the circumstances, the road can trap the subject in an ongoing cycle of transformation. Brandon’s idea of transforming his circumstances and identity always leads him into the same dangerous situations. He may be able to transform his circumstances, but they always bring him to another, similar crisis point.

In Boys Don’t Cry, driving recklessly across what is known as the “dustless highway” is regarded as a form of entertainment. The film’s co-producer Eva Kolodner, says: “The dustless highway is a real place in Falls City where the kids go; it’s a stretch of highway where, if you turn off the main road, this huge cloud of dust rolls up behind you, hides you and you just disappear. Shooting in Texas we really got that experience of driving into the stirred-up dust. It’s like driving into a dream, and that’s exactly what the experience of going to Falls City was like for Brandon” (Boys Don’t Cry Official site). The road is indeed a place of dreams for Brandon; it is also a place of transformation, because it allows him to live as he chooses to be. Whenever Brandon’s “secret” is in danger of being revealed, the road offers a means of escape. In the poster for the film, the highway and landscape is superimposed on Brandon’s face, visualising Kolodner’s statement that his experiences in Falls City were enveloping and dream-like (Figure 4.15). The last scene of the film similarly depicts the open road superimposed Lana’s face, as she leaves Falls City after Brandon’s death. These images parallel Figure 4.6, which depicts the
relationship between the street and the key characters from *My Own Private Idaho*.

As Kolodner notes above, *Boys Don’t Cry* was actually shot in Texas, and not Nebraska. The city of Dallas stood in for the empty wasteland of Falls City, primarily because the real-life controversy over Brandon Teena still continues in Falls City. Kolodner says, “Like Falls City these towns [found in Dallas] were county seats, towns of a former glory that had fallen since they were originally settled. But, best of all what we found was a whole Qwik Stop culture of narcotized kids that sleep all day and hang out all night just like in Falls City. We had all the flat farmland we needed and we found beautiful dilapidated farmhouses. It was entirely the right feel in class and attitude” (*Boys Don’t Cry* Official Site). Kolodner’s description of the “dilapidated farmhouses” as “beautiful” is fitting because it illustrates the way *Boys Don’t Cry* constructs a white trash milieu that is picturesque. Kolodner’s use of the word beauty directly runs counter to conventional notions of beauty which position it in opposition to all that is hard and rugged. There is, then, a deliberate attempt on the part of the filmmakers to challenge the conventional standards of beauty because white trashness is something rarely associated with it. Certainly, Brandon is represented as white trash, but possessing the qualities of “a little movie star” who originates from “some place beautiful”.
Poster artwork for *Boys Don’t Cry* depicts Brandon, road and landscape as one.

It is not unsurprising that Brandon should be likened to a movie star because, as I stated earlier, his masculinity is modelled on the exaggerated masculinity of the cowboy. While white trash is often conceived as a Southern U.S. construct, some of the features of white trashiness can be aligned with the Western genre where cowboys proliferate. Westerns mainly consist of white, rural characters whose sense of the landscape is very important to their identity and lifestyle. Brandon is very much represented as if he is a cowboy, travelling throughout a heartland setting. *Boys Don’t Cry* updates some of the themes often found in the Western genre, partly because Brandon inhabits the American West: “a place of renewal and reinvention, a land where pioneers could throw off the shackles of the past and live the life they always dreamed of” (Brooks, 2000: cited online). As a man, Brandon is a blend of the cowboy or frontiersman archetypes because such characters are more or less about performing and passing. The cowboy performs a very exaggerated masculinity
in the way he dresses and behaves. The cowboy passes in the sense that he is associated with movement; passing through the landscape is the key activity of the cowboy. For Brandon, this passing is about movement between places as much as it is about passing as a man, modelled on a cowboy.

Lana is more identifiable as a white trash archetype. Exuding a disaffected world-weariness from being trapped in the one place for too long. Lana also displays a very sexual side. She is represented as a temptress who attracts various men, but her emotional vacancy often keeps them at bay. Brandon is the only ‘man’ whom she responds to emotionally. When Brandon returns to Lincoln for a court appearance, he tells his gay cousin and only friend Lonny (Matt McGrath) that he will be returning to Falls City because of a girl he had met. Showing him a photo of Lana, Brandon remarks, “Isn’t she beautiful?” to which Lonny replies, “If you like white trash”. Surprisingly, Lana is not as vacant, or even as naïve as she first appears. Instead, Lana allows herself to be carried away by what Brandon represents, even though he does alert her to his difference. Brandon offers her the dream that they will start a life together, one situated in their own trailer: “The thing about the trailer park is we’ll have picnic tables, people playing music... And best of all, we’ll have our own airstream”. When Brandon is killed, Lana leaves Falls City. It is implied that she is following the path of freedom Brandon had offered her. In these final scenes the road is superimposed on Lana’s face (in much the same way Brandon’s face merges with the road in Figure 4.1), suggesting that she recognises the limitless possibilities the road may offer.

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231
The American dream for the white trash characters of New Queer Cinema is one that is inextricably linked to a sense of longing and desire to be in a place that is forever held at arm’s length. Longing and desire is played out on the road, because of the road’s potentially transformative qualities. But transformation doesn’t always occur for these characters because their marginality keeps them incapable of being transformed. They begin and end as queer white trash. Queerness keeps these characters in motion because queerness stresses the importance of movement. It is their white trashness which often lures them out onto the road, in search of that elusive something more.

In this context, whiteness is marked by both trashness and queerness. Whiteness is always at the risk of being trashed because once marked it can no longer claim to be white. Instead, it becomes off-white: a form of white trash. New Queer Cinema represents queerness in equal measure to white trash, highlighting the way race and class (among other things) contribute to the construction of one’s queerness.

The depictions of queer white trash discussed here remain marginal because the motivation or drive to be transformed above and beyond one’s class origins is not a central concern. The key characters of these films, Mike Waters, David Wojnarowicz, Brandon Teena, and Hedwig may inhabit and traverse the expanse of the open road but they can never be anything but marginal because the things they desire or search for along the way continues to remain unresolved, open-ended and removed from the dominant culture. If anything, their queer white trash marginality is reinforced as a far greater part of their identities by the concluding moments of these four films.

That is, if they make it out alive...
CONCLUSION

TOWARDS A 'WHITE TRASH CINEMA'

White Trash Cinema is a complex entity that demands a nuanced study. The most significant reason why white trash requires specialised study is because of the increased attention directed at white trash during the 1990s. This decade has made a spectacle of white trash, turning it into a popular culture phenomenon. Of course white trash existed before the 1990s, but it was in this decade that cultural critics began to precisely articulate the phenomenon of white trash in U.S. cinema. For this reason, my dissertation has brought together an eclectic group of U.S. films made between 1972 and 2002, to demonstrate that white trash is an identity under construction and is complex, fragmented, heterogenous, and multiple. This characterisation of white trash is due to cultural studies' investigations into the way race and class functions in contemporary U.S. culture. In a sense, this relatively new critical view of white trash resists buying into a series of fixed socio-economic distinctions that has long dominated discussions and representations of white trash in U.S. popular culture.

White Trash Cinema, therefore, acknowledges the way white trash is a category that must be constantly called into question and reinvented if it is to hold any sort of cultural currency. The road on which White Trash Cinema travels is long, winding and circuitous, resisting easy categorisation. Along its route are a range of eclectic films, some of which relate in terms of narratives, themes, visual markers, directors, casts and crews. Conversely, the films of White Trash Cinema are often radically dissimilar and divergent, contradictory and

233
sometimes difficult. For White Trash Cinema to remain interesting and relevant, it must always be adopting a critical attitude that acknowledges the changing face of identity politics. The category of white trash is evidence of the ways in which identity politics are always being revised and problematised.

If the project of whiteness is predicated on making the internal, unspoken privilege of whiteness visible, the project of white trash studies or White Trash Cinema must similarly demonstrate a critical edge. To simply state that films about or including white trash belong to a ‘movement’ called White Trash Cinema would be misleading. What I more formally want to argue, is that White Trash Cinema is a legitimate category of academic enquiry for conceptualising films about white trash. Furthermore, White Trash Cinema is a useful area that enables us to rethink the way white trash functions on and perhaps even off-screen. White trash is an in-between identity that exists between the political and the poetic; between the socio-economic and the socio-pathic; between trash and treasure. If white trash is the ‘film’ on whiteness, White Trash Cinema comprises a diverse range of films that continually challenge and reinvent the assumptions that often attend the category of whiteness. Of course, the films that could be regarded as worthy candidates of White Trash Cinema are not limited to the ones cited in this dissertation.

Critical work about both the category of white trash and white trash film has begun to emerge in the late 1990s, in both published form (Wray and Newitz, 1997) and on the conference circuit.¹ This dissertation is certainly not the first

¹ One conference panel attended was called “Trash Cinema”. Co-chaired by Elena Gorfinkel and Ara Osterweil, this panel was included as part of the Society for Cinema Studies Annual Conference (Washington D.C., May 24-27, 2001). The papers comprising this panel were “Art or Exploitation? ‘Dated’ Sexuality and the Trash Heap of History”
academic treatise on white trash, but it is the first of its kind to systematically collate and analyse it in some depth as a cinematic phenomenon. Furthermore, this dissertation attempts to formally establish and encourage a dialogue on the representations of white trash in contemporary cinema. This is important because, as stated above, the category of white trash has been increasingly explored in film, and has gained increased parlance during the 1990s, because characters, scenarios, and certain narrative tropes were being identified as “white trash”.

This dissertation has been concerned with mapping the terrain of White Trash Cinema. The socio-economic and socio-cultural situation of the filmmakers in question has not been of relevance to this study because I have been concerned with the product rather than the producer. To speculate on whether filmmakers who make white trash films are themselves white trash runs the risk of suggesting that a white trash filmmaker might make a more authentic white trash film. As stated in Chapter 2, some writers applauded Harmony Korine upon making *Gummo*, because his white trash youth was perceived to be the ticket that made his work authentic (See Feaster, 1998; “Production Notes”: *Gummo* Official Site). Claims to authenticity based on a director’s background are contentious, because a director like Gus Van Sant would be disqualified from being able to construct a meaningful white trash film simply because he hailed,

(Gorfinkel, New York University); “Andy Warhol: Author as Supplier” (Homay King, University of California, Berkeley); “Desiring Detritus: Paul Morrissey’s *Trash*” (Osterweil, University of California, Berkeley); “Trashed Histories: Garbage and Colonialism in Irish Cinema” (Jessica Scarlata, New York University), and a paper I delivered called “Trashing *Woop Woop*” which looked at the white trashness of the Australian film *Welcome to Woop Woop* (Stephan Elliott, 1998). While this session was titled “Trash Cinema”, all of the films discussed were more specifically examples of White Trash Cinema.
as Raymond Murray notes, from “a wealthy Connecticut family that eventually moved to Portland” (1996: 127). To either champion or dismiss a film based on its filmmaker’s socio-economic background essentialises the film in question. This is because one would run the risk of believing that a valuable contribution to White Trash Cinema can only be made from socio-economic hardship. Moreover, such arguments begin to evoke anachronistic notions of artistic genius because they imply that an artist (or filmmaker) must produce work that reflects some kind of intense personal struggle.²

Being more concerned with the film rather than the filmmaker has meant that various cinematic aspects of whiteness and white trash have been analysed at length in this dissertation. The central argument threaded throughout is that privileged whiteness and white trash are interdependent categories. As one cannot exist without the other, it has been shown how the privilege of whiteness is always trashed when it tries to distance itself from white trash. The reason being, whiteness has to recognise itself as white to be able to attempt a separation based on class. Once it sees its own racially coded whiteness, it can no longer lay claim to an inherent and natural privilege. If whiteness was to remain unchallenged, it would have to ignore its own construction as a raced and classed entity. The category of white trash is important because it forces privileged whiteness to see itself. In doing so, whiteness is always at risk of being trashed. White trash, therefore, brings about the trashing of whiteness.

² The ultimate symbol of artistic genius is, arguably, Van Gough’s severed ear, which he cut off in a fit of madness. In cinema, the severed ear is not always the result of the supposed confluence between genius and madness. The severed ear recurs in films like Blue Velvet (David Lynch, 1986); Chopper (Andrew Dominik, 2000); Mother’s Day (Charles Kaufman, 1980) and Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1992). To varying degrees, these
Chapter 1 introduced the important concepts of race and class necessary for an examination of whiteness in film. The conceptual framework of 'privileged whiteness' established in this chapter can be perceived as a mask that—by virtue of its characterisation as a mask—comes to reveal itself. The tensions of whiteness as both visible and invisible is a key ingredient of the upper-middle-class worlds presented in Pleasantville, Safe and American Psycho. Privileged whiteness is examined before white trash because the version of upper-middle-class whiteness depicted in these films recognises itself as white and becomes trashed in the process. This chapter reinforces the key idea that very little distance exists between privileged whiteness and white trash because the former is always in crisis, becoming marked and unstuck in its attempt to stay afloat.

Representations of white trash are introduced more explicitly in Chapter 2. Here the sometimes difficult relationship between privileged whiteness and white trash was explored using three filmic case studies, Gummo, Lawn Dogs and O Brother, Where Art Thou? As these films demonstrate, the relationship between whites and white trash is enacted along the lines of race, class, place and (hetero) sexuality. White trash is often perceived to be criminal, deviant, defective and bred within a particular place (Gummo). The place in which white trash is found—like in a trailer in the woods—can also assist in producing white trash as uncultivated, 'primitive' and, therefore, as highly desirable and alluring (Lawn Dogs). White trash is not only a visual marker in White Trash Cinema; it is also musical because the frequent alignment of country music with white trash inevitably renders country music as a white trash genre. The particular

films are all littered with white trash characters, though only Chopper and Mother's Day qualify as white trash films because white trashness is a key aspect of their narratives.
relationship between country music and white trash is often underscored (no pun intended) in White Trash Cinema because it "fabricates the authenticity" of white trash identity (Peterson, 1997). Likewise, country music is used to aurally signify the white trashness of the film in question (O Brother, Where Art Thou?).

If Chapter 2 was concerned with the ways in which white trash is authenticated, Chapter 3 rejected authenticity. The main reason is that this chapter was concerned with the campness of white trash. What are the repercussions for white trash when white trash goes camp? Arguably, white trash becomes a knowing entity that is made aware of its own construction as trash. Camp celebrates artifice and irony, leaving no room for authenticity. It is the very authenticity of white trashness that is seen as naïve, pure and in some cases puerile. Referring to John Waters’ films Pink Flamingos, Female Trouble, Desperate Living and Pecker, this chapter explored the intersections between camp and white trash, bringing about what I termed a “camp/trash aesthetic”.

In a contemporary context, the term camp often invokes aspects of sexual identity categories because campness has been historically associated with homosexuality. Similarly, the concept of queer has been discussed and debated within the context of sexuality. For this reason, Chapter 4 introduced the queerness of whiteness and white trashness. But in much the same way that camp is not always about sexuality, queer refers to more than just sexual identity. Using My Own Private Idaho, Postcards From America, Boys Don’t Cry and Hedwig and the Angry Inch, this chapter demonstrated the way New Queer Cinema of the 1990s has significantly contributed to White Trash Cinema.

While White Trash Cinema always features white trash characters, it does not necessarily have to utilise a white trash aesthetic. As this project has
demonstrated, white trash is complex, fragmented and multiple in character, so a singular white trash aesthetic would be impossible to identify. Certainly, it goes without saying that films exhibiting unsophisticated production values or themes are often described as “trashy”, but this in itself does not constitute a white trash aesthetic. Of course, I have used the term aesthetics in a general sense, rather than in philosophical terms. Arguably, philosophical ruminations on aesthetics are unsuited to the category of white trash, because the very concept of white trash often calls into question established ideas of aesthetics, conventional standards of beauty, and popular distinctions between good and bad taste. This dissertation has been more concerned with the various 'looks' of white trash cinema, and it must be said that these 'looks' refer to both the content and form of the specific films discussed. There is no singular characteristic visual marker for the white trash aesthetic, but attempts have been made by various filmmakers to subvert or revise conventional approaches to white trash in terms of narrative logic, characterisations, settings and so on.

Having surveyed, analysed and promoted the concept of White Trash Cinema, it must be said that this dissertation has not meant to be an exhaustive study on the topic. Instead, this dissertation has been concerned with engaging in an analysis of the key features and themes to do with white trash through a number of cinematic case studies. With the exception of the case studies discussed in Chapter 1, the films examined here demonstrate the obsession

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3 This is due to the fact that the word “trashy” can be used to describe a film which is not concerned with white trashness. Films described as “trashy” usually exhibit an unsophisticated, cheaply conceived ‘look’, or alternatively, are regarded as “trashy” because of their unimportant content. For example, melodramas, women’s pictures and soap operas are often dismissed as “trashy”.
contemporary culture has with white trash. They are, moreover, specimens of a widely divergent White Trash Cinema.

The divergence of White Trash Cinema certainly lends itself to further examination in a scholarly context. Prospective students of White Trash Cinema might want to engage with the challenges raised in this study by entering into a dialogue that insists on plotting the development and evolving nuances of an ongoing White Trash Cinema. For instance, one main area where further study could be undertaken is the relationship between white trash and trailers/trailer parks. White trash has come to be associated with trailers and trailer parks perhaps more than any other thing. So there is a rich expanse to mine concerning depictions of trailer park culture in regard to the larger category of White Trash Cinema.

The case study of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* permitted me to explore aspects of Southern U.S. white trash, and especially its commitment to country music. However, it might be useful for someone to undertake further the relationship between cinema and country music with regard to the constructions of white trash identity. Another area that could be expanded upon is the way representations of white trash in the Southern areas of the U.S. have contributed to a White Trash Cinema. Commonly referred to as the ‘Deep South’, the Southern States of America have been responsible for constructing particular narratives of white poverty that are rich in history. The markers by which Southern U.S. white trash is measured usually have to do with things that are often ridiculed. For example, a few of the markers/stereotypes attributed to Southern white trash are: intolerance, ignorance and bigotry; a value system deeply entrenched in compulsory heterosexuality, right wing politics and
Christianity; and of course, a life-long soundtrack of country music. But Southern white trash cannot be reduced to this simple list because the same set of markers are often linked to privileged Southern whites as well. Some work has been undertaken in relation to hillbillies and hicks in cinema (Williamson) and Jim Goad’s non-cinematic *The Redneck Manifesto* goes some way in dismantling Southern U.S. stereotypes, but certainly others may well find this a profitable area to develop in relation to White Trash Cinema. Filmmakers including Robert Altman and Terrence Malick have explored Southern U.S. whiteness and white trash in films that certainly warrant attention within the context of White Trash Cinema.

Is white trash a specifically U.S. phenomenon? The relationship between White Trash Cinema and non-U.S. film could be another area for continued academic work. Australian cinema, for example, offers exciting possibilities for expanded analysis in relation to White Trash Cinema because numerous Australian films explore the unique cultural and socio-economic tensions that exist within different parts of Australia. Recent films like *The Finished People* (Khoa Do, 2003), *Gettin’ Square* (Jonathan Teplitzky, 2003), *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002), *Teesh and Trude* (Melanie Read, 2002), *Chopper* (Andrew Dominik, 2000), *The Boys* (Rowan Woods, 1998), *Welcome to Woop Woop* (Stephan Elliott, 1997), *Kiss or Kill* (Bill Bennett, 1997) and *Body Melt* (Philip Brophy, 1993) are textured with white trash characters and narratives. While recent Australian films demonstrate a preoccupation with white trash that is by now familiar, Australian avant-garde film cultures of the 1970-80s also explored the seamy underbelly of Australian culture, with particular emphasis placed on beach-side or urban inner-city sub-cultures. Examples of this include the films of Albie
Thoms, Bert Deling, Mary Callaghan and Toby Zoates. Surely, if evidence of white trash abounds in Australian culture, it must be noted that it exists within numerous other locations as well (such as England and Ireland), however, white trash in such contexts is constituted by an altogether different set of conditions, terms, aspects and features.

This dissertation has been concerned with the momentum White Trash Cinema has gained in the last thirty years. Who knows what the next thirty years will bring for white trash aesthetics, for White Trash Cinema? While the future may be uncertain, White Trash Cinema will remain a subject of fascination and worthy of study. If the last thirty years have been anything to go on, the future of White Trash Cinema will be, as Mink Stole states in Desperate Living, “positively top drawer”.

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4 Thoms directed Sunshine City (1972) and Palm Beach (1979); Deling directed Pure Shit (1976) and Dead Easy (1982); Callaghan directed Greetings From Wollongong (1982) and Tender Hooks (1989), and Zoates directed The Thief of Sydney (1984). Numerous other films like Fran (Glenda Hambly, 1985), Going Down (Haydn Keenan, 1983), Hard Knocks (Don McLennan, 1980), Monkey Grip (Ken Cameron, 1982), Running on Empty (John Clark, 1982) and This Woman is Not a Car (Margaret Dodd, 1982) are prominent for their representations of Australian white trash.
APPENDIX 1.1

TODD HAYNES

To date, Todd Haynes’ films have not explored or represented white trash identity. Todd Haynes (b. 1961, USA) does, however, warrant isolated commentary in an appendix because his films continually represent identity as fractured, contentious and forever shifting—a key concern in my analysis of both privileged whiteness and white trash. In Chapter 1, his film Safe is examined as a narrative of privileged whiteness that comes unstuck, visible and unstable when its protagonist Carol White (Julianne Moore) is faced with the alarming effects of Environmental Illness.

Along with his long-term producer Christine Vachon (see Appendix 4.1), Haynes is historically associated with “New Queer Cinema” (see Chapter 4). Haynes’ place in the New Queer Cinema was assured when his first feature Poison won the coveted Grand Prize at Sundance Film Festival in 1991. Haynes, whose training was in semiotics and art, states that the queer-themed Poison “plays around with the act of telling stories while at the same time asking a few serious questions about the nature of deviance, cultural conditioning and disease” (cited in Murray, 1996: 65).

Poison generated much scandal upon release because of its darkly explicit depiction of gay sex between prison inmates. Though he had never actually seen Poison, the Reverend Donald E. Wildmon denounced the film on the grounds that it contained “explicit porno scenes of homosexuals involved in anal sex” (cited in Levy, 1999: 464). Having been partly funded with a post-production
grant of $25,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, Poison became embroiled in the controversy that attended other artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano and Karen Finley. As far as these right wing morality groups were concerned, this small group of government funded artists were targeted as prime examples of what they perceived to be a decline in conservative standards of artmaking. In part, this political and media scandal helped Poison's success at the box office, alerting audiences and critics everywhere to Haynes' unique vision and style.

Haynes is no stranger to scandal because his previous effort Superstar, a 45 minute film on the life and death of singer Karen Carpenter, was withdrawn from circulation after her brother Richard Carpenter forced an injunction against the film due to its unauthorised use of The Carpenters music. Staged on miniature sets with Barbie dolls as actors, Superstar also explored themes of disease and cultural conditioning because of its focus on the possible social causes of the anorexia that brought Karen Carpenter's life to a tragic end in 1983.

Haynes continued to explore these themes with Safe, his second feature made five years after Poison and two years after a made-for-television short Dottie Gets Spanked. Safe was not really a departure into the mainstream, but it certainly did guarantee Haynes a degree of critical success, because it was listed on many “Ten Best” lists for films released in 1995. Safe also assisted in launching Julianne Moore as a major talent, as it was her first leading role in a film.

Haynes followed the quiet melodrama of Safe with the lurid excess of his glam rock fable Velvet Goldmine. Starring Ewan McGregor, Toni Collette and Christian Bale, Velvet Goldmine borrowed structurally from Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941), and revised popular myths associated with glam stars like David
Bowie and Iggy Pop. Even though *Velvet Goldmine* was a star-studded, relatively accessible pop culture narrative, the film failed to ignite box-office attention, and disappointed many critics, who usually held Haynes in high regard.

Haynes' most recent film *Far From Heaven* is his second collaboration with Julianne Moore. *Far From Heaven* premiered at the Venice Film Festival, and won four awards: two for Moore (best actress and audience actor award), cinematography (Edward Lachman) and an Honourable Mention for Haynes. More recently the film has been nominated for four 2003 Academy Awards. Influenced by the lush, sweeping melodramas of Douglas Sirk, *Far From Heaven* is set in the 1950s and concerns the disintegrating relationship of an affluent, socially prominent couple (Moore and Dennis Quaid) due to his latent homosexuality and her emergent friendship with her African American gardener (Dennis Haysbert).

**FILMOGRAPHY**

**Writer/Director**

*Far from Heaven* (2002)
*Velvet Goldmine* (1998)
*Safe* (1995)
*Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993)
*Poison* (1990)
*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987)
*Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud* (1985)
APPENDIX 2.1

HARMONY KORINE

Filmmaker, writer and artist Harmony Korine was born in Nashville, T.N. in 1974. Korine first came to public attention when his original film script for *Kids* was directed by Larry Clark (and co-produced by Christine Vachon) in 1995. Even though *Kids* was controversial in nature, including scenarios where young kids take drugs and have unprotected sex, Korine’s unique, daring and often unsettling vision was not evident until his directorial debut *Gummo* (1997).

*Gummo* divided critics and audiences upon release because of its controversial subject matter. Janet Maslin wrote in *The New York Times* (October 17, 1997. Accessed online) that *Gummo* was “the worst film of the year”, while Gus Van Sant claims that with *Gummo* “Harmony Korine has come up with a completely original creation” (cited on *Gummo* Official Site). Despite dividing viewers, *Gummo* certainly shows that Korine is a cultural producer whose work is primarily concerned with white trash youth cultures. While *Kids* was similarly concerned with these themes, it was *Gummo*’s experimental approach to narrative and casting that demonstrated the way that Korine was not only concerned with white trash images, but an artist determined to trash conventional notions of film form, popularised by many mainstream U.S. films.

Korine’s unconventional approach to filmmaking, and his resistance to mainstream U.S. cinematic forms was taken to another level in 1999 when he directed *Julien Donkey-Boy* under the rules of Dogma ’95. In brief, Dogma ’95 was founded in Copenhagen by filmmakers Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg.
Any filmmaker could make a Dogma ‘95 film as long as they conformed to the Dogma ‘95 Vow of Chastity: a list of ten rules that appealed to a form of ‘back to basics’ filmmaking. For example, the Vow of Chastity denounces the use of special lighting, optical or sound effects; camera had to be hand held; and the film had to be shot on location with no special costumes or props. Korine’s aesthetic was suited to this rigorous criteria because such conventions were often shirked in *Gummo*.

*Julien Donkey-Boy* was a film about a schizophrenic called Julien (Ewan Bremner) who lives with his dysfunctional working-class family. Julien’s incestuous relationship with his sister Pearl (Chloë Sevigny) results in her becoming pregnant. When Pearl miscarries at an ice-skating rink, Julien steals the foetus from the hospital where she had been taken. Korine based this bizarre narrative on the life of his schizophrenic uncle who was institutionalised when Korine was a child.

In addition to writing and directing films, Korine is a visual artist who has exhibited his work in Los Angeles, New York and Tokyo. He has co-written songs with Björk and Ben Lee and authored numerous books which include published versions of his films scripts, artist books, and an experimental novel *Crack Up at the Race Riots* (1998). In 1998, Korine directed a music video for Sonic Youth called “Sunday” which starred Macauley Culkin and his teenage wife Rachel Miner (who starred in Larry Clark’s *Bully* in 2001). “Sunday” helped reinvent Culkin’s former child star image because it featured slow-motion imagery of then 18-year-old Culkin pouting, licking his lips and passionately kissing Miner. Images of pirouetting pre-teen ballerinas are dispersed throughout, contributing to the video’s disconcerting images of teen sexuality.
FILMOGRAPHY

Director

Julien Donkey-Boy (1999)
“Sunday” (Sonic Youth Music Video, 1998)
Gummo (1997)

FILMOGRAPHY

Writer

Ken Park (Larry Clark, 2002)
Julien Donkey-Boy (1999)
Gummo (1997)
Kids (Larry Clark, 1995)

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APPENDIX 2.2

COEN BROTHERS

Joel Coen (b. 1957, USA) is credited as the director of all of the Coen brothers films but it is well known that they are co-directed, as well as co-written and co-produced with his brother Ethan Coen (b. 1954, USA). They also edit their films together using the pseudonym Roderick Jaynes.

The Coen brothers have produced a body of work that is heavily stylised, often borrowing from the film noir genre. Their films regularly reference a wide variety of films, which has led to their work being characterised as postmodern parody and pastiche. It is this emphasis on the artifice of stylisation and appropriation that has caused many critics to dismiss their work as shallow. For example, film critic Emanuel Levy writes, “their ambitious films are full of allusions to old movies, but emotionally they are vapid, calling attention to a huge gap between form and feeling” (1999: 223).

In most cases, the narratives of their films center on an array of oddball characters who are often criminals, outlaws or mobsters. In many cases, as in Raising Arizona, Fargo, The Big Lebowski, and O Brother, Where Art Thou?, the Coen brothers represent criminals as white trash, though in all cases except Fargo, these white trash criminals are loveable, eccentric heroes who propel the film’s narratives. These films are often positioned geographically within conventional locations for representing white trash. In particular, Raising Arizona, Fargo and O Brother, Where Art Thou? regionalise white trash within small town settings of the states of Arizona, Minnesota and Mississippi respectively. Film critic for The New
York Times, A.O. Scott argues, “sometimes, as in Fargo, the Coens’ fondness for outré regionalism verges on contempt, as if they were implicitly contrasting their own sophistication with the literal-minded dumbness of their characters” (December, 2000).

Such criticisms as this relate to the way the Coen brothers rarely utilise a ‘sincere’ or ‘unselfconscious’ white trash aesthetic (as in Harmony Korine’s films). Rather, the Coen brothers’ elicit too much critical or ironic distance between themselves and their characters. The frequency of white trash representations in the Coen brothers’ films have, however, positioned them as strikingly original contributors to a cinematic notion of white trashness in contemporary American cinema.

FILMOGRAPHY

The Man Who Wasn’t There (2001)
The Big Lebowski (1998)
Fargo (1996)
The Hudsucker Proxy (1994)
Barton Fink (1991)
Miller’s Crossing (1990)
Raising Arizona (1987)
APPENDIX 4.1

GUS VAN SANT

Gus Van Sant has made a career out of representing white trash hustlers, queers, drug addicts, and teenage misfits. Van Sant’s third feature, *My Own Private Idaho* was released in 1991, in time for an emergent New Queer Cinema. The success of this film led some film critics to announce Van Sant as the leading force of New Queer Cinema. In an article from 1992, film critic Amy Taubin writes: “It’s Van Sant’s depiction of marginality … coupled with his non-linear, associative filmmaking strategies, that make him one of the leaders of American queer cinema” (2001: 90). Emanuel Levy refers to Van Sant in similar terms: “The undisputed leader of the new queer cinema is the Portland-based director Gus Van Sant, an iconoclast who has provided a fresh, distinctive voice in American movies” (1999: 452).

Van Sant’s first film, *Mala Noche* (1985) also contained queer white trash themes. Set in the seamy underbelly of Portland, *Mala Noche* was about a young man’s unrequited gay desire. Raymond Murray (1996: 128) misleadingly called *Mala Noche* an “early example” of New Queer Cinema even though it was made seven years before B. Ruby Rich coined the term in 1992.

Taubin and Levy’s statements position Van Sant as the leader of New Queer Cinema, based on his specific approach to making films. Van Sant is a queer pioneer because his (earlier) films were concerned with marginality. In this sense, marginality is referring to the representation of that which exists on the border, or outer limits of the mainstream. This depiction of marginality works on
two levels. On the one hand, the characters, subject matter and themes Van Sant utilises are marginal. In *My Own Private Idaho*, this marginality has to do with the way queerness and white trashness is simultaneously evoked, producing characters that are marginal in terms of sexuality, race and class. On the other hand, Van Sant’s (earlier) films are marginal in relation to the broader sphere of mainstream filmmaking practices in America. Van Sant’s non-linear, experimental approach to narrative is dubbed “associative”, “fresh” and “distinctive” by Taubin and Levy because such modes of storytelling were unique to American narrative cinema at this time.

New Queer Cinema was inciting acclaim from film critics primarily because it went against the grain of conventional narrative cinema, and subverted past depictions of lesbians and gays in film. Van Sant was, therefore, considered the “undisputed leader” of New Queer Cinema because his “fresh, distinctive voice” was being expressed in films that actively challenged narrative form and presented a cinematic model queerness that also happened to be white trash. Other Van Sant films that utilise queer white trash themes are *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993), *To Die For* (1995) and *Elephant* (2003).

**FILMOGRAPHY**

**Feature films**

*Gerry* (2002)
*Psycho* (1998)
*Good Will Hunting* (1997)
To Die For (1995)
Even Cowgirls Get the Blues (1993)
My Own Private Idaho (1991)
Drugstore Cowboy (1989)
Mala Noche (1985)

Short films

Four Boys in a Volvo (1996)
Five Ways to Kill Yourself (1986)
Ken Death Gets Out of Jail (1985)
Nightmare Typhoon (1984)
Where'd She Go? (1983)
My Friend (1982)
Alice in Hollywood (1981)
The Discipline of DE (1978)
Late Morning Start (1975)
1/2 of a Telephone Conversation (1973)
Little Johnny (1972)
The Happy Organ (1971)
Fun With A Bloodroot (1967)

Selected Music Videos

“Ballad of the Skeletons’’ by Allen Ginsberg (1996)
“Keep Me Movin’” by k.d. lang (1993)
“Fame 90” by David Bowie (1990)
APPENDIX 4.2

CHRISTINE VACHON

The one figure of New Queer Cinema whose work remains consistently fresh and distinct—words which echo descriptions of Van Sant’s earlier work—is that of producer Christine Vachon (b. 1962). It is along the lines of Vachon’s extensive résumé that one can see the development of New Queer Cinema. Vachon first came to public attention for her work on Todd Hayne’s Poison. The success of Poison was followed with equally challenging and critically lauded queer films Swoon and Go Fish. Having established her New York-based production company Killer Films in 1996, Vachon is perhaps one of the most visible and respected producers dedicated to American independent cinema. While Vachon has produced many of the leading New Queer films of the 1990s, she resists being pigeon-holed within the queer sphere. In her book Shooting to Kill, Vachon writes:

After Poison and Swoon, I was dubbed “the Queen of Queer Cinema,” an appellation I loathe. Then I was attacked by a lesbian writer for only making movies with gay men—this after I’d just produced two features! When I took on the lesbian love story Go Fish, some people suggested it was a strategy to prove my tastes extended beyond boy movies. You never can win. I’d never make a film solely because it’s edgy or provocative or features a gay subject, and I’d never refuse to make a film solely because it doesn’t (Vachon & Edelstein, 1998: 19).
Vachon's track record of late includes just as many queer films as it does non-queer. But her more recent work like Boys Don’t Cry, Hedwig and the Angry Inch and most recently Todd Haynes new film starring Julianne Moore and Dennis Quaid, Far From Heaven (to be released December 2002 in USA) demonstrate the way queer films have to a large extent crossed over into a mainstream consciousness.

FILMOGRAPHY

Producer

Far from Heaven (Todd Haynes, 2002) (producer)
One Hour Photo (Mark Romanek, 2002) (producer)
Fine and Mellow (Hilton Als, 2001) (producer)
Chelsea Walls (Ethan Hawke, 2001) (producer)
Grey Zone, The (Tim Blake Nelson, 2001) (producer)
Storytelling (Todd Solondz, 2001) (producer)
Safety of Objects, The (Rose Troche, 2001) (producer)
Women in Film (Bruce Wagner, 2001) (producer)
Series 7: The Contenders (Daniel Minahan, 2001) (producer)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (John Cameron Mitchell, 2001) (producer)
Crime and Punishment in Suburbia (Rob Schmidt, 2000) (producer)
Boys Don’t Cry (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) (producer)
Wildflowers (Melissa Painter, 1999) (executive producer)
I’m Losing You (Bruce Wagner, 1998) (producer)
Velvet Goldmine (Todd Haynes, 1998) (producer)
Happiness (Todd Solondz, 1998) (producer)
Office Killer (Cindy Sherman, 1997) (producer)
Kiss Me, Guido (Tony Vitale, 1997) (producer)
Plain Pleasures (Tom Kalin, 1996) (producer)
I Shot Andy Warhol (Mary Harron, 1996) (producer)
Kids (Larry Clark, 1995) (co-producer)
Stonewall (Nigel Finch, 1995) (producer)
Safe (Todd Haynes, 1995) (producer)
Postcards from America (Steve McLean, 1994) (producer)
Go Fish (Rose Troche, 1994) (executive producer)
Dottie Gets Spanked (Todd Haynes, 1993) (TV) (producer)
Swoon (Tom Kalin, 1992) (producer)
Poison (Todd Haynes, 1990) (producer)
Oreos with Attitude (Larry Carty, 1990) (producer)
He Was Once (Mary Hestand, 1989) (producer)
Tommy’s (Barry Ellsworth, 1985) (producer)

Second Unit Director /Assistant Director /Miscellaneous Crew

Girls Town (Jim McKay, 1996) (additional help)
Poison (Todd Haynes, 1990) (first assistant director)
Laserman, The (Peter Wang, 1990) (second unit assistant director)
Magic Sticks (Peter Keglevic, 1987) (third assistant director)
My Demon Lover (Charlie Loventhal, 1987) (production coordinator)
Parting Glances (Bill Sherwood, 1986) (assistant editor)
Far From Poland (Jill Godmilow, 1984) (production assistant)
Variety (Bette Gordon, 1983) (production assistant)
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Alphabetical Listing

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, USA, 1968)
American Beauty (Sam Mendes, USA, 1999)
American Psycho (Mary Harron, USA, 2000)
Badlands (Terrence Malick, USA, 1973)
Blow Job (Andy Warhol, USA, 1963)
Blue Velvet (David Lynch, USA, 1986)
Boogie Nights (Paul Thomas Anderson, USA, 1997)
Boom (Joseph Losey, UK, 1968)
Boys Don't Cry (Kimberly Peirce, USA, 1999)
Boys in the Band, The (William Friedkin, USA, 1970)
But I'm a Cheerleader (Jamie Babbit, USA, 1999)
Carrie (Brian DePalma, USA, 1976)
Cecil B. Demented (John Waters, USA, 2000)
Celluloid Closet, The (Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman, USA, 1995)
Chelsea Girls, The (Andy Warhol, USA, 1966)
Children's Hour, The (William Wyler, USA, 1961)
Chopper (Andrew Dominik, Australia, 2000)
Coal Miner's Daughter (Michael Apted, USA, 1980)
Couch (Andy Warhol, USA, 1964)
Cruising (William Friedkin, USA, 1980)
Cry-Baby (John Waters, USA, 1990)
Days of Heaven (Terrence Malick, USA, 1978)
Deep Throat (Gerard Damiano, USA, 1972)
Deliverance (John Boorman, USA, 1972)
Desperate Living (John Waters, USA, 1977)
Diane Linkletter Story, The (John Waters, USA, 1969)
Divine Trash (Steve Yeager, 1998)
Down by Law (Jim Jarmusch, USA, 1986)
Drugstore Cowboy (Gus Van Sant, USA, 1989)
Eat Your Makeup (John Waters, USA, 1967)
Edward II (Derek Jarman, USA, 1991)
Election (Alexander Payne, USA, 1999)
Empire (Andy Warhol, USA, 1963)
Executioner’s Song, The (Lawrence Schiller, USA, 1982)
Falling Down (Joel Schumacher, USA, 1993)
Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (Russ Meyer, USA, 1962)
Female Trouble (John Waters, USA, 1974)
Fight Club (David Fincher, USA, 1999)
Go Fish (Rose Troche, USA, 1994)
Gummo (Harmony Korine, USA, 1997)
Hag in a Black Leather Jacket (John Waters, 1964)
Hairspray (John Waters, USA, 1988)
Happiness (Todd Solondz, USA, 1998)
Head On (Ana Kokkinos, Australia, 1998)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (John Cameron Mitchell, USA, 2001)
Hold Me While I’m Naked (George Kuchar, USA, 1966)
Hustler White (Bruce LaBruce, USA, 1996)
I Shot Andy Warhol (Mary Harron, USA, 1996)
In Cold Blood (Richard Brooks, USA, 1967)
Jeffrey (Christopher Ashley, USA, 1995)
Julien Donkey-Boy (Harmony Korine, USA, 1999)
Khush (Pratibha Parmar, UK, 1991)
Kids (Larry Clark, USA, 1995)
Latin Boys Go To Hell (Ela Troyano, USA, 1997)
Lawn Dogs (John Duigan, UK, 1997)
Lip Gloss (Lois Siegel, Canada, 1993)
Living End, The (Gregg Araki, USA, 1992)
Love and Human Remains (Denys Arcand, Canada, 1993)
Love is the Devil (John Maybury, UK, 1998)
Magnolia (Paul Thomas Anderson, USA, 2000)
Making Love (Arthur Hiller, USA, 1982)
Mala Noche (Gus Van Sant, USA, 1985)
Man Who Wasn’t There, The (Joel Coen, USA, 2001)
Me, Myself and Irene (Farrelly Brothers, USA, 2000)
Midnight Cowboy (John Schlesinger, USA, 1969)
Mondo Trasho (John Waters, USA, 1969)
Mother’s Day (Charles Kaufman, USA, 1980)
Multiple Maniacs (John Waters, USA, 1970)
My Hustler (Andy Warhol, USA, 1965)
My Own Private Idaho (Gus Van Sant, USA, 1991)
Nashville (Robert Altman, USA, 1975)
O Brother, Where Art Thou? (Joel Coen, USA, 2001)
Only the Brave (Ana Kokkinos, Australia, 1994)
Orlando (Sally Potter, UK, 1991)
Out of the Blue (Dennis Hopper, USA, 1980)
Paris is Burning (Jennie Livingston, USA, 1990)
Pecker (John Waters, USA, 1998)
Philadelphia (Jonathan Demme, USA, 1993)
Pink Flamingos (John Waters, USA, 1972)
Pleasantville (Gary Ross, USA, 1998)
Poison (Todd Haynes, USA, 1990)
Polyester (John Waters, USA, 1981)
Postcards From America (Steve McLean, USA, 1994)
Preaching to the Perverted (Stuart Urban, UK, 1997)
Pretty Woman (Gary Marshall, USA, 1990)
Proof (Jocelyn Moorhouse, Australia, 1991)
Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1960)
Raising Arizona (Joel Coen, USA, 1987)
Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 1992)
Roman Candles (John Waters, USA, 1966)
Safe (Todd Haynes, USA, 1995)
Scorpio Rising (Kenneth Anger, USA, 1963)
Sebastiane (Derek Jarman, UK, 1976)
Serial Mom (John Waters, USA, 1994)
Shallow Hal (Farrelly Brothers, USA, 2001)
Sins of the Fleshapoids (Mike Kuchar, USA, 1965)
Sleep (Andy Warhol, USA, 1963)
Sleepless in Seattle (Nora Ephron, USA, 1993)
Sling Blade (Billy Bob Thornton, USA, 1996)
Speedway Junky (Nickolas Perry, USA, 1999)
Stepford Wives, The (Bryan Forbes, USA, 1975)
Stonewall (Nigel Finch, UK/USA, 1995)
Sullivan’s Travels (Preston Sturges, USA, 1941)
Sum of Us, The (Geoff Burton & Kevin Dowling, Australia, 1994)
Super 8 1/2 (Bruce LaBruce, Canada, 1994)
Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (Todd Haynes, USA, 1987)
Swoon (Tom Kalin, USA, 1992)
There’s Something About Mary (Farrelly Brothers, USA, 1998)
Trees Lounge (Steve Buscemi, USA, 1996)
Un Chien Andalou (Luis Buñuel & Salvador Dali, France, 1936)
Wanderers, The (Philip Kaufman, USA, 1979)
Watermelon Woman, The (Cheryl Dunye, USA, 1996)
Welcome to Woop Woop (Stephan Elliott, Australia, 1997)
When Night is Falling (Patricia Rozema, Canada, 1994)
Wigstock: The Movie (Barry Shils, USA, 1995)
Wings of Desire (Wim Wenders, Germany, 1988)
Wizard of Oz, The (Victor Fleming, USA, 1939)
Women in Revolt (Paul Morrissey, USA, 1971)
Young Soul Rebels (Isaac Julien, UK, 1991)
You’ve Got Mail (Nora Ephron, USA, 1998)
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