



Trash! The Wildest Films You've Ever Seen

Multiple Maniacs

Multiple Maniacs

Directed by: John Waters

©: John Waters

Dreamland Studios present

a Dreamland production

Produced by: John Waters

Production Assistance: David Lochary,
Howard Gruber, Bob Skidmore, Mink Stole,
Jack Walsh

Written by: John Waters

Director of Photography: John Waters *

Stills Photography: Lawrence Irvine

Lobsters by: Vince Peranio

Edited by: John Waters

Cast:

Divine

David Lochary

Mary Vivian Pearce

Mink Stole

Cookie Mueller

Edith Massey

Susan Lowe

Rick Morrow

Howard Gruber

Paul Swift

Vince Peranio

Jim Thompson

Dee Vitolo

Ed Peranio

Bob Skidmore

Margie Skidmore

Jack Walsh

Susan Walsh

Gilbert McGill

Pat Moran

Paul Landis

Mark Lazarus

Harvey Freed

Suzie Nichols

Steve Waters

Julia Richardson

Will Cullen

Jack Roberts

Mark Isherwood

Berenica Cipcus

Hawley Peterson

Tom Wells

Michael Renner

Cowboy

George Figgs (*Jesus Christ*)

USA 1970

91 mins

Digital

* Uncredited

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It's no accident that *Multiple Maniacs* opens with a carnival barker. Transgressive spectacle is the name of the game in John Waters's first feature-length talkie – though it's curious to note, almost half a century on, how some things retain the power to shock, others lose it and others take it on. The barker in question, Mr David (David Lochary), is drumming up interest in Lady Divine's 'Cavalcade of Perversions', a roadshow that satisfies straight suburbanite prurience by exhibiting such unconscionable sights as a puke-eater, a human ashtray and 'two actual queers kissing like lovers on the lips!' More scandalous than the activities themselves is the fact that the freaks are *enjoying themselves* so damn much. Something similar could be said about *Multiple Maniacs* itself: as well as being a scorching blast of proto-punk rebellion and a sophisticated mélange of eclectic formal influences, it's a gleefully slapdash exercise in doing what feels good.

By virtue of running the Cavalcade – which is really a roving excuse to relieve squares of their wallets and sometimes their lives too – Divine and Mr David are the warped parental figures of an extended family on the brink. The Cavalcade clan are destabilised by Divine's escalating bloodlust and Mr David's affair with wannabe starlet Bonnie (Mary Vivian Pearce), not to mention Divine's handful of a daughter (Cookie Mueller) and the advent of an alluringly religious pervert (Mink Stole). The gang's psychodynamics play out in a whirl of polymorphous desire, murderous rage, outsized set pieces and strange epiphanies. The aesthetic is wildly ironic, defying the suspension of disbelief at every turn; yet the cast play it straight and the sensibility is shot through with the sincere satirist's indignation at normative hypocrisy and cant.

Multiple Maniacs was a watershed for Waters, Divine and the rest of the Dreamland collective, which mostly comprised middle-class Baltimore Catholic kids turned countercultural dropouts. There had already been shorts (*Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, *Roman Candles*, *Eat Your Makeup*) and a picaresque feature without dialogue (*Mondo Trasho*) that set a tone of proud schlock-culture grotesquerie. That was taken to new extremes, for sure, but now character and narrative came to the fore too.

Divine is the heart of the picture, a spectacular sacred monster who knows no limits but feels things deeply. In her pomp, she's sheer weaponised glamour, a snarling, smouldering travesty of Elizabeth Taylor and Jayne Mansfield rolled into one. But she can also evoke the femme fatale of *noir*, the demure, put-upon *Hausfrau* of the women's picture and the rampaging colossus of *King Kong* or *Godzilla*. Crucially, there's no winking: whether boiling with rage, cooing with pride or trembling with sexual awakening, she plays it for real. It's this sincerity that lends weight to the unfolding atrocities, tethering in emotional reality Divine's absurd adventures in criminal enormity (gorging on raw offal standing in for human flesh) and spiritual awakening (a visitation from the Infant of Prague), as well as her unconventional domestic life and her surprising, unhinging rape by a 15ft lobster.

The cinematic genealogy of this heady concatenation is rich and varied: multiple classical Hollywood genres rub against exploitation tropes derived from Herschell Gordon Lewis, Russ Meyer and Swedish softcore; yet no less evident are traces of Warhol, Buñuel, Bergman and Pasolini, along with the Theatre of the Absurd. And it's hard not to think of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* when watching a mobhanded recreation of the Stations of the Cross intercut with the notorious church-filmed 'rosary job'. If the film's religious satire still startles, its offhand valorisation of the Weathermen and casual narrative exploitation of the Sharon Tate murders – both torn from the headlines – generate real frissons. Meanwhile supposedly shocking set pieces (shooting up, smashing a car) seem less shocking today than all that body hair.

Trash! The Wildest Films You've Ever Seen

Trash

Mon 30 Mar 18:10; Thu 9 Apr 20:30 (+ intro by Jaye Hudson of TGirlsonFilm)

Reefer Madness

Mon 30 Mar 20:45; Sat 11 Apr 15:10

Multiple Maniacs

Tue 31 Mar 18:20; Sun 26 Apr 18:20;
Thu 30 Apr 20:40

Trash! Season Introduction:

Some Films Are Trash, Some Have

Trash-Ness Thrust Upon Them

Wed 1 Apr 18:10

Normal Love

Wed 1 Apr 20:20 (+ intro by Professor Dominic Johnson, Queen Mary University of London);
Mon 13 Apr 20:30

Blood Feast

Thu 2 Apr 18:05 (+ intro by writer Virginie Selavy);
Wed 15 Apr 20:45

Sins of the Fleshapoids

Thu 2 Apr 20:30; Sun 12 Apr 18:10

Hold Me While I'm Naked, George Kuchar!

Fri 3 Apr 18:20; Mon 13 Apr 18:00 (+ extended intro by Professor Juan A. Suárez, author of Experimental Film and Queer Materiality)

Thundercrack!

Sat 4 Apr 17:20; Sat 25 Apr 20:00

Pink Flamingos

Sun 5 Apr 18:30; Fri 10 Apr 18:00

Plan 9 from Outer Space

Tue 7 Apr 18:10 (+ extended intro by BFI National Archive preservation and curatorial staff, and writer Ken Hollings); Tue 21 Apr 20:55

Ed Wood

Tue 7 Apr 20:25

Salvation! + pre-recorded intro by Beth B

Wed 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 28 Apr 20:30

Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!

Thu 9 Apr 18:20; Thu 23 Apr 21:15

Another Day, Another Man

+ Elevator Girls in Bondage

Sat 18 Apr 18:00; Wed 22 Apr 20:20 (+ intro by film scholar and critic Dr Elena Gorfinkel)

Super 8½

Sat 18 Apr 20:45; Thu 30 Apr 18:05

I Was a Teenage Serial Killer

+ A Family Finds Entertainment

Fri 24 Apr 18:30; Mon 27 Apr 18:30

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In many ways a document of the death of the 60s, *Multiple Maniacs* also kickstarted an extraordinary journey that made an underground star of Divine and, through the successive breakthroughs of *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Hairspray* (1988) and the latter's musical adaptation, saw this bunch of freaks carve themselves a place in America's bosom.

Ben Walters, *Sight and Sound*, May 2017

John Waters on 'Multiple Maniacs'

I paid back my father the \$3,000 I had borrowed from him and asked to borrow \$5,000 more to make another film. He hemmed and hawed, petrified that he would be somehow linked to these films, but finally gave his okay, and *Multiple Maniacs*, my first 'talkie' was born.

During the late sixties I felt like a fish out of water. As the rest of my generation babbled about peace and love, I stood back, puzzled, and fantasised about the beginning of the 'hate generation'. Woodstock was the last straw. Sitting in the mud with a bunch of naked hippies and their illegitimate children and listening to Joan Baez was hardly my idea of a good time. Violence was this generation's sacrilege, so I wanted to make a film that would glorify carnage and mayhem for laughs.

In 1969, right before I started to shoot *Multiple Maniacs*, Sharon Tate was murdered. The crime would have a profound influence over the entire making of the film. Since the real killers hadn't been apprehended yet, I decided that Divine would take credit for the murders in the film. I figured that if the murderers were ever caught, there would always be the possibility that *maybe* Divine really *did* do it. We wanted to 'scare the world', just like the unheard-of Manson Family, but we used a movie camera instead of deadly weapons. The murder became an obsession, and I talked about it so much that one of our new actors flipped out in the middle of a scene and ran from the set, screaming 'I know that's a police camera. You tricked me into confessing to the Tate murders, and now I'll be arrested!' As I was completing the film, the Manson Family was caught, so I quickly changed the ending, explaining that Divine really hadn't done it. Nobody, not even Divine, could upstage Charles Manson.

I always referred to *Multiple Maniacs* as my 'celluloid atrocity.' Even though it's technically primitive and the actors sometimes forget their lines, it's still my favourite of all my films. I like its meanness and harsh documentary look; and for the first time the actors could spew forth the endless pages of dialogue I had written, lip-synced at last.

I began circulating posters with the ad line 'You Won't Believe This One!' and *Multiple Maniacs* sold out all nine premiere showings. As usual, the audience either hated the film or loved it, but the ones who loved it seemed more enthusiastic than ever. I began hoping that I could line up some bookings for the film outside my usual Baltimore-Provincetown circuit.

The local underground press cheered the film, calling it 'a swift kick in your voyeur's mind', but more importantly, Lou Cedrone of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* gave us another great pan: '*Multiple Maniacs* is not only uglier and more revolting than his *Mondo Trasho*, it is even more repugnant than *The Conqueror Worm* [*Witchfinder General*]. Waters' first "talkie" is also his first "sickie".' He even gave the audience a scolding: 'These people seem most appreciative when blood is being spilled and knives are being plunged – is this part of the "new world" they have in mind?'

The Los Angeles free press announced our arrival with a great review: 'You have never, and I mean never, seen any movie remotely like *Multiple Maniacs*. Its jet-black humour goes beyond anything ever put on film. It is skilfully made, devastating in its black humour, low down and raunchy and frighteningly relevant to today – can only be compared to Tod Browning's *Freaks*.'

John Waters, *Shock Value* (Fourth Estate, 1991)

Programme notes and credits compiled by Sight and Sound and the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged | Browse online at theb.fi/programme-notes

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