

# The rise and fall and rise again of John Waters

Cecil B. Demented, written and directed by John Waters

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This is the best American film I've seen this year, and probably the only that does something to advance the pleasure principle.

John Waters has been making films for 30 years or more. A native of Baltimore, born in 1946, Waters made his name with *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1975), two genuinely tasteless and remarkable films, which managed to embrace the grotesque in working class and lower middle class and suburban American life, without slipping into condescension or prettification. They were disturbing films, deliberately ugly and absurd, but among the few that gave the spectator something of the look and feel of the way millions and millions of people—almost entirely excluded from artistic representation—in the US were living and continue to live: thrashing about wildly in confusion, desire and anxiety.

Waters' films of the 1980s seemed less interesting to me. There are amusing and clever bits in *Hairspray* (1988) and *Cry-Baby* (1988), but, all in all, they seemed to represent a falling off, perhaps an (unconscious) accommodation to an unfavorable climate. That may be a little unfair, or at least incomplete. There was also an aesthetic problem: how was Waters to maintain the crude and “badly made” quality of his earlier films, which gave them some of their vitality, as he developed his technique and had far greater resources to work with? It's a problem, that in one way or another, confronts every serious filmmaker. In any event, with *Pecker* (1998) and *Cecil B. Demented*, in my view, Waters has returned more or less to form.

In the new film, *Cecil B. Demented* is the leader of a band of cinema guerrillas who capture Hollywood star

Honey Whitlock, in Baltimore on a publicity tour for her newest effort, *Some Kind of Happiness* (“A screwball romantic comedy, life-affirming ... Couldn't we use a little optimism in the movies?”), and force her to play the leading role in their own no-budget film, *Raving Beauty*. *Demented*, who tends to speak in slogans, is intent on leading “a revolution to destroy mainstream cinema.” Among his rallying cries: “Power to the people who punish bad cinema!”

The first sequence in which *Demented* directs Honey, on a slightly haphazard film set built inside a deserted movie theater, takes place at an art cinema showing a “Pasolini festival.” Lyle, a drug addict, and Cherish, a former porn star, apparently play the owners of the cinema, with Honey the latter's mother. The dialogue goes something like this:

Cherish: “We didn't sell one ticket.”

Lyle: “Pasolini is playing and we have an empty theater.”

Honey: “It's that multiplex theater.”

Lyle: “Not for the *Flintstones* sequel!”

After that *Demented* decides to take his film crew out in the streets, for “real life ... and real terror.” Eventually Honey comes to appreciate the virtues of underground cinema and throws herself into the project. In the course of making their film, the group invades and disrupts a number of events, beginning with a showing of *Patch Adams—the director's cut* (at which the entire audience is sobbing) in a suburban mall. Then comes a press and industry party hosted by the Maryland Film Commission, whose guests are guzzling oysters. The group members confront the film industry types about their rotten films and corrupt lives. “I was only following studio orders,” whimpers one of the

latter. Another, who directed an inferior remake of a foreign film, asserts in self-defense, “American audiences won't watch subtitles.” A third, the “vice president of creative affairs,” says, “I don't go to the movies.” The head of the film commission promises one of Demented's band, if she'll release him, “We'll go to Sundance together!”

Next the group takes upon itself to close down the filming of *Gump Again* (the remake of *Forrest Gump*), taking place on a set composed of fake grass in front of a fake city skyline. The director and the cameraman, “Jean-Pierre,” are complacent hacks. “Nobody can stop the popularity of *Forrest Gump*!” the former indignantly tells the invaders of his set. The star of the remake, Kevin Nealon, lamely puts in, “I only take the roles I'm offered.” When all hell breaks loose, the director's voice can be heard loudly proclaiming that the disruption is costing “a thousand dollars a second!”

In the course of their struggle, Demented, Honey and the others also pass through cinemas showing karate and porno marathons. A battle erupts at one point between the karate fans and the “family film” crowd and, later, another between Teamsters members and porn lovers. Confrontations between the guerrillas and the authorities become more and more violent, and fatal. The film's fiery denouement takes place during a Honey Whitlock triple-bill and look-alike contest organized at a drive-in.

Waters and his performers manage to establish the precisely correct tone. The extravagance and silliness are played with absolute earnestness. Cecil (Stephen Dorff), looking a little like Lou Castel in Fassbinder's *Beware the Holy Whore*, is a wild-eyed martinet with “Otto Preminger” (a legendary dictator on the set) tattooed on his arm. He's forbidden his cast and crew to find any sexual release during shooting, demanding “celibacy for celluloid” and calling on them to “save your sexual energy for the screen.”

Melanie Griffith too has the role of her career as Honey, a bit dimwitted, selfish, with that little-girl voice, but capable, like so many actors in real life, of extraordinary self-sacrifice and dedication and going far “beyond themselves” when it comes to roles and projects they believe in.

Waters has made a work which says what practically no one else will admit out loud: that Hollywood is turning out bland and conformist films and that the

movie studios, dominated by large financial interests, are operated by philistines and cowards. “I'm a prophet against profit,” declares Cecil. “One day you'll thank me for saving you from your bad career,” he tells Honey. “Technique is nothing more than failed style” is another of his proclamations. Honey, once she's gotten into the swing of things, tells a hostile crowd that “‘family' is just a dirty word for censorship,” and later, announces, “Bad movies must be avenged!”

All in all, the film is a joy, a sensual argument for “cinema unrest,” as Waters calls it, and a liberating experience because, for a change, one has the sense that the director is speaking honestly with his own voice. Moreover, virtually every target of the film is legitimate and deserving of scorn and derision. Of course the film is one prolonged joke, but, behind the humor, is the notion that art is not about financial success, but a serious and urgent activity, with consequences, and worth making enormous sacrifices for. And that no cinema without those qualities is worth considering. Waters makes fun of Demented and his cronies, but the mockery is tempered with sympathy, even envy.

The critical response has generally been favorable, but in a number of relatively prestigious publications one encounters this sort of attitude: “It's a bit trite,” “This is of course a simplification,” and even, in French, “Pas très drôle” [not very funny]. I'm suspicious of those who respond in this manner. Frankly, anyone in and around the film industry to whom this work is not a pleasure has a vested interest in the status quo. I'm inclined to agree with Cecil: “Death [or at the very least, ignominy] to those who support mainstream cinema!”



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