

# Sex, Comedy and Controversy: Kiss Me, Stupid, What's New, Pussycat?, New Hollywood, and Metropolitan Taste

By Ken Feil

The institutions of commercial Hollywood, art cinema, and the avant-garde might differ in terms of taste cultures and publics, but in the 1960s they all produced films that comically flaunted vulgar, sexual subject matter, pop culture parody, and more generally, a "metropolitan" sensibility. This cocktail proved lethal to the guardians of traditional culture, who vehemently repudiated certain films for challenging the hegemony of "middlebrow" and "petty bourgeois" taste. The taste tests of the 1960s resulted in the popularizing of a metropolitan, "new" sensibility, a "good taste of bad taste" variously defined and labeled as "Pop," "mod," "camp," "cult," the "far-out," the "put-on" (among many others)<sup>1</sup>. The "new sensibility" reverberated among mainstream audiences and throughout the commercial mass media, coinciding with and perhaps expediting the demise of the Production Code Administration (PCA) and installation of the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), the loosening of televisual standards and practices, as well as the emergence of the New Hollywood art film.

Little attention has been paid to the recurrent impact of sex comedies in this transformative process.<sup>2</sup> Kiss Me, Stupid (1964) and What's New, Pussycat? (1965) remain two such forgotten catalysts of "New Hollywood" cinema in terms of testing the boundaries of "vulgar" sexual content permitted by the Code and film audiences, incorporating art film and avant-garde subjects and styles, as well as flagrantly blurring the lines between high and low taste. With its classical Hollywood style, "foreign movie" content, and noisily controversial reception, Kiss Me, Stupid underscored the hoary criteria for Hollywood's Code and middlebrow culture's definition of tastefulness, but audience apathy provided a triumph for traditionalists.

By contrast, the big-budget, U.S.-French co-production What's New, Pussycat? was a monumental success, among the first Hollywood films with wide distribution to commercialize the European art film's style and sexual license as well as an aesthetic attitude perceived as "campy," "way out" and "absurd."

As a mainstream, "Adults Only" art film and "mass camp" sensation, Pussycat helped establish the foundations for New Hollywood films in terms of commercializing an experimental style, anti-bourgeois content, and the underground, urban sensibility for appreciating it.<sup>4</sup>

A tug-of-war ensued throughout 1960s middlebrow film culture, with taste, sex, nudity, and cinematic style at the center of the tussle.<sup>5</sup> Mark Betz and Karl Schoonover each account for the scrambling of high and low taste codes, the "artful and trashy," from the late 1940s through the 1960s in the American advertising and spectatorship of "European," "artistic" films with seamy sexual content.<sup>6</sup> Janet Staiger, Juan Suárez, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, and Gregg Taylor all examine the underground, avant-garde film movement of the early 1960s and its scandalous confrontation of high cultural conventions with "the good taste of bad taste" manifested in queer "camp."<sup>7</sup> All of these struggles over taste influenced the New Hollywood art film, generally considered the offspring of the European art film, the underground and other avant-garde film movements, as well as B-movie cults and classical Hollywood.<sup>8</sup>



Kiss Me Stupid (1964)

Many strong cases have been made for which films launched “the new cinema,” as Time dubbed it in 1967: The Pawnbroker (1965), The Chase (1965), Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966), The Chelsea Girls (1966), Alfie (1966), Blow-Up (1966), The Shooting (1966), Point Blank (1967), The Graduate (1967), Bonnie and Clyde (1967), Targets (1968), Easy Rider (1969), Midnight Cowboy (1969), and many others. All of these films exemplify the incorporation of art cinema style (from jump cuts and pastiche to tragicomic irony), themes of moral ambiguity, “adult” language, sexuality, nudity, and violence; they also reflect the period of transition from the PCA to the CARA.<sup>9</sup> Accounts of New Hollywood repeatedly overlook the prevalence of Hollywood sex comedies in all these processes, with the exception of William Paul’s Laughing Screaming, which cites the “uninhibited sexuality” in “the landmark sex comedies of the period” beginning in 1967 with The Graduate.<sup>10</sup>

More than two years before The Graduate, the sex comedies Kiss Me, Stupid and What’s New, Pussycat? contributed to the revolution of film content, cinematic style and audience taste that culminated in New Hollywood. What set these films apart from other influences on New Hollywood was precisely their comedic subversion of taste codes and related moral values, their location of the audience’s taste for transgression and brazen attempt to “satisfy” it. Pierre Bourdieu attributes these elements to “all forms of the comic”: “they satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, the free speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties.”<sup>11</sup> By “overturning conventions and proprieties” through “free speaking and hearty laughter,” both of these films validated alternative tastes and lifestyles.<sup>12</sup>

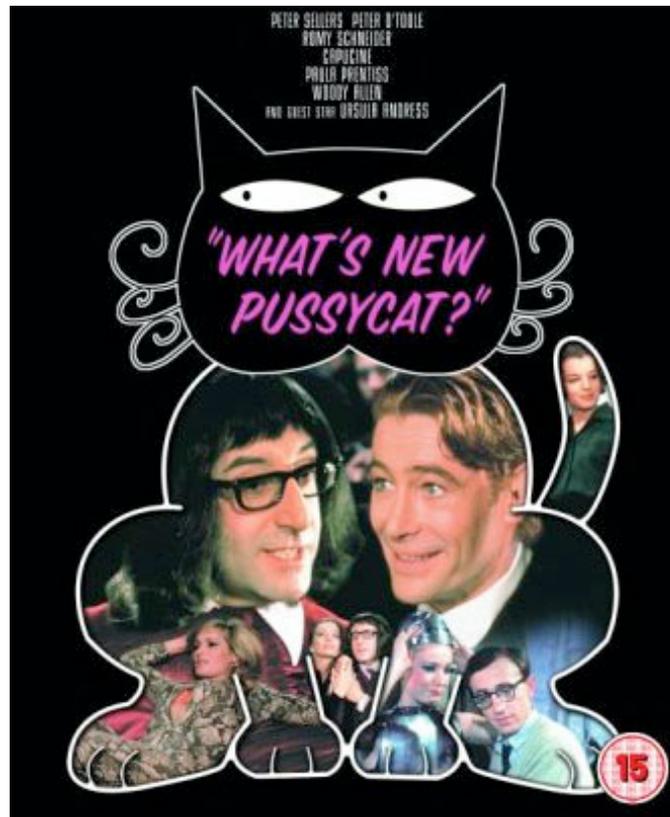
Kiss Me, Stupid, released in December 1964, and What’s New, Pussycat?, released just six months later, transgressed the rules of middlebrow taste and what Bourdieu calls the “petty bourgeois aesthetic,” the aim of which is “to arouse the moral sense” and “educate.”<sup>13</sup> These sex comedies appeared to critics to “arouse” immoral behavior and “educate” audiences in vulgarity. In Stupid, a flurry of phallic sight gags and sexual double entendres adorn the tale of a small-town song writer (Ray Walston) who hires a prostitute (Kim Novak) to impersonate his wife (Felicia Farr) and sleep with Dino (Dean Martin), a randy music and film star, in hopes of selling the celebrity a song. The composer fornicates with the prostitute, though, and his wife (mistaken for the prostitute) has sex with Dino; the couple eventually reunites, no questions asked.

Pussycat involves a promiscuous Parisian fashion magazine editor (Peter O’Toole) who, in an attempt to cure himself of the itch and marry his lover (Romy Schneider), attends group therapy with a sex-starved analyst (Peter Sellers).

A parade of sexual deviates, illicit sex, suicide attempts, an explosion, a wild chase, and abundant references to foreign and mainstream movies ensue. The film concludes happily with the undoubtedly doomed marriage of O’Toole and Schneider.

Kiss Me, Stupid and What’s New, Pussycat? drew critical hostility from middlebrow pundits of a kind explained by Bourdieu: “The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated.”<sup>14</sup> After all, “disapproving of content” defines the occupation of middlebrow critics, Herbert Gans claims, whatever “they perceive as too experimental or philosophical ... or too clichéd and ‘vulgar’ on the other hand.”<sup>15</sup> Stupid and Pussycat questioned the stability of “high” and “low” sociocultural hierarchies by asserting a “vulgar” urban sensibility, awakening

even higher risks that Bourdieu explicates: "At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living ... which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness."<sup>16</sup> Middlebrow critics fervently railed against Stupid, Pussycat and the very notion of blurring good and bad taste, ostensibly to defend traditional tastes and lifestyles, but such sound and fury also signified their angst-ridden inability to define "legitimate culture," morality, and lifestyles anymore.



Whats New Pussycat (1965)

The progression from Kiss Me, Stupid, released in December 1964, to What's New, Pussycat?, released the following June, demonstrated the decline of hegemony for the traditional middlebrow and the rise of a "new sensibility," one that embraced the metropolitan good taste of bad taste. Both films challenged numerous petty-bourgeois limits, inspired by the box office successes of "adult" foreign art films popular in the nation's cities and the shrinking market for Code-and Legion-approved "family" films that trumpeted middleclass, "rural" American values.<sup>17</sup> The Legion "condemned" Stupid for being "esthetically and morally repulsive,"<sup>18</sup> reviewers largely agreed, and the film flopped. Despite critical hectoring, Pussycat proved a surprise commercial triumph and signaled the insurgence of "hip," nonconformist, metropolitan groups, namely gay and youth cultures, and their sensibilities; for this "generation of taste" (in the words of a New York Times letter-writer), the accepted divisions between high and low no longer held sway. If the style, sensibility and success of Pussycat represented the passage from "Classical" to "New" Hollywood, the new generation of taste represented the mainstream movement away from "Main Street" "tastefulness" toward urban good-bad taste.

### **BROW WARS, PART I: The "Small Town" Production Code Versus "Metropolitan" Art Films**

Without question, the mainstream's increasing embrace of varied "metropolitan" sensibilities helped push the PCA and the Legion toward obsolescence in the mid-1960s. The creation of the Production Code in 1930 formalized the rules of the petty bourgeois aesthetic, and its eventual enforcement beginning in 1934 represented to audiences in the U.S. Hollywood's championing of middleclass, "small town" taste and morality.<sup>19</sup> In 1934, denunciations of Hollywood films proliferated, for being "dirty," exploiting "vulgar" sexuality and only addressing the "retrograde tendencies of the public taste" in New York City; detractors demanded "clean" pictures.<sup>20</sup> The terms of this hectoring recall the historical work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, who observe in nineteenth century discourse "the mapping of the city in terms of dirt and cleanliness," "moral degradation," and "the vulgar commodity [that] could contaminate the home ..."<sup>21</sup> The equation of "urban" with vulgarity, immorality, and filth also confirmed another stereotype, as Lawrence Knopp illuminates, "portrayals of sexual diversity and freedom as peculiarly urban phenomena"; demonizing the city's "dirty" sexual subcultures and attitudes functioned "to sanctify majority cultures and spaces."<sup>22</sup>

The assumption that urban influences drove the production of "dirty pictures"<sup>23</sup> further stemmed from Hollywood's reliance on Broadway.<sup>24</sup> According to journalist Peter Bart (writing in 1965), Martin Quigley justified writing the Code in 1930 because the mainstream needed protection from the "liberal" tastes of the "metropolitan minority" transmitted through the glut of films adapted

from Broadway productions.<sup>25</sup> In the headline for one 1934 piece, the Chicago Daily Tribune opined, "Clean Cinema Movement May Affect Drama," and predicted that "naughty" Broadway would mimic Hollywood and rid itself of "dirt-slingers" such as Mae West in order to sell movie rights and avoid audience backlash.<sup>26</sup> A 1934 New York Times story about Hollywood's application of the Code quoted the PCA's Joseph Breen on the "polluted" source material for films—plays and novels—and demands that Hollywood "clean itself up." The same article generalized the equation of urban taste with "vulgar," "indecent" films in its sub-headline, "the Film Centre Now Listens to Main Street," and observations about studio executives who formerly only cared about "what the New York critics thought, ignoring the opinion and even the box-office receipts of the small towns."<sup>27</sup>

Exemplary of all the studios in summer 1934, RKO president B.B. Kahane aimed "to eliminate henceforth all material in films that is not clean and in good taste."<sup>28</sup> The Code now required films to behave, in its own words, with "good taste and regard for the sensibilities of the audience," to avoid any number of sexual demonstrations, "Crimes against the law," and "Vulgarity," all of them expressions of offensive, unclean, urban tastes.<sup>29</sup> By adhering to the Code and preventing offending films from wide distribution, the studios projected a picture of middleclass, mainstream, "Main Street" decorum.<sup>30</sup> And by keeping movies within bourgeois lines, avoiding threats of censorship or a "Condemned" rating from the influential Legion, the PCA could achieve its objective: to transform the reputation of the Hollywood movie from "vulgar commodity" of the city into "clean pictures" sensitive to "small towns" and families.<sup>31</sup>

An initial sign of changing tastes manifested in the behavior of urban and college-town audiences who attended adult-oriented art films in such considerable numbers that they rivaled Hollywood product. When independent exhibitors turned to foreign art movies for material to screen in the late 1940s,<sup>32</sup> art films' stylistic innovations, "racy" subjects and imagery differentiated them from the Hollywood, Code-approved, family film.<sup>33</sup> Contrasting Hollywood movies to European productions, the Legion stated in early 1965, "The [moral] dangerousness of American films is quite less incisive than that generally present in European works."<sup>34</sup> Many popular foreign films about immoralists in Rome, Paris, London, and Athens entered theatres denied PCA seals and condemned by the Legion.<sup>35</sup>



Never on Sunday (1960)

The Greek sex comedy Never on Sunday (1960), for instance, became the most successful foreign film exhibited in the United States, without a Code seal, with a "condemned" rating, and featuring an Athenian prostitute protagonist who embraces a life of sin over the option of middleclass, middlebrow reform.<sup>36</sup> All of these elements, textual and extra-textual, radiated permissive "urban" values and tastes.

By the mid-1960s, the rise of foreign art films teeming with sex in the city yielded both financial as well as artistic frustration in Hollywood, and a crisis among cultural "custodians" such as the PCA. Robert C. Allen articulates Hollywood's longstanding business strategy, "that the largest possible audience could be attained by appealing to middle-class interests and tastes,"<sup>37</sup> an impulse that dictated the creation and application of the Code, but defining "middle-class interests and tastes" grew increasingly more difficult in the face of "adult," "foreign" and "metropolitan" art films. As the nation's leading film critic Bosley Crowther of the New York Times attested in 1964, "there was nothing they [the PCA] could do to control the taste and content of films that came from abroad," and as a result, "the patrolling [sic] of taste by the custodians of the Code was considerably relaxed."<sup>38</sup> In 1965, Peter Bart reported in the New York Times, "the films that are creating the most talk and the biggest profits are generally being made abroad either by Europeans or by expatriate Americans," and in the same piece disparaged Hollywood's "self-censorship code" as "steeped in hypocrisy and desperately out of date," an obstacle to creative and commercial competition with foreign films.<sup>39</sup> The fact that urban art houses in the United States overflowed with audiences attending "European works," many of them unapproved by the PCA and the Legion, indicated a shift in popular taste toward a "metropolitan" sensibility and motivated Hollywood to address it.

The release of the "ADULTS ONLY," "condemned" Kiss Me, Stupid provided for critics a primary example of the lurid metropolitan sensibility undermining the values of the Code and infesting domestic Hollywood product, not just European imports.<sup>40</sup> In a Variety article published alongside reports of the Legion's condemnation of Stupid, MGM producer Joe Pasternak aimed his fears and accusations squarely at urban influences, and reaffirmed traditional mainstream tastes in the process: "Our moral standards should not be set by New York, Chicago and Los Angeles ... The greatest movie audiences are in the smaller cities, towns and rural areas, and those people are offended by the filth that gets on the screen." Wielding the petty-bourgeois mandate for morality, discretion and education, Pasternak isolated "nudity for the sake of nakedness" and "the downright dirt" of "bed-chamber scenes." "We should make pictures for the family again," he demanded, and ended with the warning, "if we don't clean our house, it will be cleaned for us by legislation."<sup>41</sup> Pasternak's impassioned censure of the "dirt" and "filth" provoked by urban "moral standards" and commercially exploited by Hollywood were, like the proclamations of 1934, founded in the binaries city/country, dirty/clean, moral/immoral, and vulgar/tasteful, as well as a conception of commodity culture as pollutant of bourgeois morality.<sup>42</sup>



Ray Walston, Dean Martin, Kim Novak, Kiss Me Stupid

The same chain of associations obtained in the reception of Kiss Me, Stupid as a "vulgar," "dirty," "crude," "filthy," "squalid" "commodity" threatened to contaminate innocent audiences. A.H. Weiler of the New York Times described Stupid as "long on vulgarity," Philip T. Hartung of Commonweal found it "tasteless and insulting" with performances that "accentuate the vulgarity," and The New Yorker's Brendan Gill called the film "repellent" and "squalid."<sup>43</sup> The Chicago Daily Tribune charged the film with "vulgarity," calling it "a prolonged, dirty and unfunny joke" and "heavy with crude innuendo."<sup>44</sup> Life magazine's Thomas Thompson complained that Stupid violated the Code's prohibitions against "'Vulgar expressions and double meanings,'" amounting to "a titanic dirty joke" branded "filthy" by an audience member fleeing the theater.<sup>45</sup> Following Life and the Tribune, Time magazine also likened Stupid to

"dirty jokes," granting it "a kind of vulgar integrity," but accused director/co-writer Billy Wilder of "exploiting [sex] as a commodity."<sup>46</sup>

If the negative reviews of Kiss Me, Stupid mounted defenses of middlebrow and petty-bourgeois taste through an underlying hostility to metropolitan taste(lessness), the few endorsements of the film vindicated an urban perspective. Newsweek's critic insinuated that only an urbanite schooled in "Modern Art" and European art films could have appreciated the "dirty" and "moral" Stupid. After defending Stupid as a "moral picture," the reviewer detailed Wilder's trip to "New York to be honored at the Museum of Modern Art, which is currently presenting a two-month retrospective of Wilder's work."<sup>47</sup> The "condemned" Stupid indeed compared to art, European art films that the Legion also rated "C"—"Breathless," "Jules and Jim," "Knife in the Water," "L'Avventura," "La Notte," "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning," and "My Life to Live"—by ironic (perhaps elitist) contrast to the Legion's "A-1" family fare: "'Goliath and the Sins of Babylon,' 'The Earth Dies Screaming,' 'Godzilla vs. the Thing,' and 'Snake Woman.'"<sup>48</sup> Active in this critic's reasoning was the polarity of family films, implied to maintain "small town" values, versus foreign art movies, urban in terms of their content and American exhibition.



Billy Wilder and Dean Martin on the set of Kiss Me, Stupid

Joan Didion's Vogue review characterized Kiss Me, Stupid as an utter reversal of the hierarchies historically adhered to by the Code, Legion, scores of commentators, and (ostensibly) audiences. Stupid was a "sleazy" yet "moral" satire, by contrast to "the real tastelessness" of successful Hollywood sex comedies "like The Pink Panther and Bedtime Story."<sup>49</sup> But "people walk[ed] out" of Stupid, a fact explained by the film's portrayal of small town America in terms usually associated with the city:

... a world of cheap double-entendre ... suffused with the despair of an America that many of us prefer not to know ... the aridity of the desert, where the road signs direct one only to dream cities ... the ugliness of a town on that desert ... a place where time is told by television schedules, where no one is beautiful or gifted... a place where the flesh is urgent because nothing else is.<sup>50</sup>

Stupid offended so intensely, not just due to its "sleazy" content, but because it attributed a particularly urban "ugliness" to small town denizens.<sup>51</sup> Such heresy required a metropolitan sensibility to appreciate it as "moral."

Six months later, however, audiences attended the sex comedy What's New, Pussycat? in abundance, despite the chorus of critics who accused the film of deliberately embracing and redeeming tastelessness as "fashionable," "hip," "in," "far out," and "camp." With all that Kiss Me, Stupid and Pussycat shared as "Adults Only" sex comedies that insulted middlebrow critics, challenged sexual mores and upset the standards of the Code, only one of them succeeded at the box office. This might have related to Stupid's classical style as compared to Pussycat's "far out" experimentation. Following Pussycat's box office coup, New York Times reporter Bart noted "the pressure building up in Hollywood for filmmakers to try and copy the 'far out' pictures like 'What's New Pussycat,'" movies dismissed in the same article by Billy Wilder as "'Arty Schmarty."<sup>52</sup> Far more than Stupid, Pussycat represented a new metropolitan sensibility, in its setting of Paris (with allusions to New York), its art film style and content (pastiche, reflexivity, and sexually voracious

characters), and the enthusiasm of the ticket-buying audience. The fifth top grossing film of the year,<sup>53</sup> Pussycat coalesced the subtextual elements of Stupid's content and reception, urban sensibility and foreign art film sexuality, along with stylistic choices inspired by experimental films and the rise of "the good taste of bad taste."



Peter Sellers and Ursula Andress, What's New, Pussycat?

## **BROW WARS, PART 2**

When What's New, Pussycat? opened June 22, 1965, the stakes appeared intensely elevated for reviewers who campaigned or sermonized against this film. Critics accused Pussycat of commercializing vulgarity, a common undercurrent in attacks on Kiss Me, Stupid,<sup>54</sup> but this new film flashed its bad taste with a "hip," art movie self-consciousness. Unlike the unabashedly Hollywood Stupid, a generic sex comedy with a tight narrative crafted by a Hollywood elder, Pussycat camouflaged its profit-driven exploitation of bad taste in the style of the low-budget, "high" cultural art film, with a screenplay penned by the young, New York comedian Woody Allen. Far from a low-budget art film, though, Pussycat remained a pricey production aiming to capitalize on stars as well as "fashionable," lurid depictions of sexual freedom stolen from more tasteful foreign films.

What's New, Pussycat? posed a clear threat to accepted middlebrow taste standards, especially if it succeeded with audiences, because it conveyed the idea that the taste for vulgarity now carried cultural capital as "fashionable," sophisticated, and metropolitan.<sup>55</sup> The fervent assaults on Pussycat materialized middlebrow critics' efforts to defend the "art film" and a traditional definition of "art" from the insurgent, urban, "underground" sensibility of good-bad taste that merged "art" with vulgarity. Critics feared that if Pussycat appealed to audiences, the urban sensibilities of good-bad taste would triumph over establishment definitions of art, taste, and society, and so would the inner-city lifestyles represented by good-bad taste: campy gays, culture vultures, and rebellious youths.

New York critic Susan Sontag coined the expression "good taste of bad taste" in "Notes On 'Camp,'" an article from the fall 1964 edition of Partisan Review that provoked a groundswell of mainstream attention.<sup>56</sup> In the months surrounding the premiere of What's New, Pussycat?, the word "Camp" circulated as a "catch-all" expression for good-bad taste, as in the title of Thomas Meehan's March 1965 New York Times magazine story: "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste—It's 'Camp.'"<sup>57</sup> Meehan and others consistently related this good-bad taste to urban, nonconformist sensibilities, and in particular, "homosexual taste." Those associations also included "New York," "Underground," and "Pop" sensibilities, as in Meehan's announcement, "the only Camp movies being made today are the so-called Underground movies ... produced in the East Village by people like Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Jonas and Adolfo Meekas, Alfred Leslie and Gregory Markopoulos."<sup>58</sup> Gloria Steinem's "A Vest-Pocket Guide to Camp" in Life magazine also emphasized the literal urban and subversive significance of camp. Comparing "homosexual" camp in the "decorative arts" to other urban, ghettoized sensibilities, "Negro" Jazz and "Yiddish" show business, Steinem also attributed a dissident attitude to gay camp: "Homosexuals, who have always had a vested interest in knocking down bourgeois standards, are in the vanguard of Camp, though no longer its sole custodians."<sup>59</sup> Time perpetuated Steinem's idea of "knocking down bourgeois standards" in its emphasis on the theme of sexuality: "In matters sexual ... . Camp goes against the grain"; and quoting Sontag, "Homosexuals ... constitute the vanguard ... of Camp."<sup>60</sup>

The Time article also stressed camp's ties to New York City, literally with Sontag, "one of Manhattan's brightest young intellectuals," and in more figurative references to "Dirty movies," "androgynous, swoony girl-boys and boy-girls," "homosexuality," and the "lover of vulgarity."<sup>61</sup> Some of the same characteristics appeared in a 1960 New York Times exposé of the "decay" of Times Square: "grind

joints" screening "sex and violence" all night; "homosexuals," such as "a Negro who wore fluffed up hair and heavy black make-up on his brows and lashes" and a "white youth" in "make-up" who "spoke effeminately and shifted his hips and legs as he spoke"; and a heterosexual "youth in a black jacket and tapered trousers" who listened to "nothing but rock'n'roll" and considered "homosexuals ... 'nice people.'" These "unsightly, raucous, offensive" examples were also "a kind of gaudy index to the shifting population trends and to the patterns of dress and behavior of millions of New Yorkers."<sup>62</sup> Such an alarming, urban, "gaudy index" predicted the predilections of camp, according to Time by way of Sontag: "the lover of Camp, is a lover of vulgarity ... the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves."<sup>63</sup>

For many middlebrows, camp's celebration of the urban "stink" of sexual outspokenness, vulgarity, and an anti-bourgeois, "underground" social perspective was wholly unredeemable, not by intellectuals such as Sontag, and certainly not by gays or young people. Camp's salvation of vulgarity presented a direct threat to any established ideas about aesthetics and morality, sentiments that charged the highbrow assault on the New York Underground film movement.<sup>64</sup> The apparent camp coup of mainstream culture posed an evermore pressing danger to traditionalists, as camp's lifestyles of urban sexual perversity and radical nonconformity could also become fashionable.<sup>65</sup>

Calvin Trillin's New Yorker satire "Barnett Frummer and Rosalie Mondle Meet Superman: A Love Story" (April 1965) reduced camp to a fad among impressionable New York college graduates mimicking Sontag's appropriation of gay style in an effort to acquire status, prestige, and sexual conquests.<sup>66</sup> The eponymous Frummer meets his former college roommate Roland Magruder at a party, dressed in drag and full of insight into "how to become a tastemaker":

I myself am so heterosexual it's fantastic ... but if the ticket of admission to the avant-garde is an occasional pair of high heels, I say pay it.' Wanting very much to be part of the avant-garde himself, Frummer had eagerly accepted Magruder's invitation to audit meetings of the Batman Club, an all-male organization that met in the back of a Scopitone bar every Wednesday to discuss what the Wyoming Quarterly had called 'the nature of the relationship between ... the various partners against crime found in the comic books of the middle forties.'<sup>67</sup>

Trillin's infantile, disingenuous, would-be tastemakers traverse New York City, from "the roller derby" to "Roseland Dance City" and Dick Tracy serial retrospectives "at the Modern Museum," the metropolis their camp playground.<sup>68</sup> For Trillin, camp reduced New York's cultural life and communities to superficial cliques vying for the mantle of hipness through a dubious taste code that "could spread until nothing in the culture has any value anymore ..."<sup>69</sup>

Amos Vogel provided a more affirmative account of metropolitan good-bad taste in his promotion of the 1965 New York Film Festival, connecting the urban film festival to youth culture, Pop art, rebellion and the commercial appeal of "fashionable," "new," "young," "experimental" films.<sup>70</sup> Notwithstanding Vogel's well-documented (and possibly homophobic) aversion to the "'camp' atmosphere" of the New York Underground film movement, the programmer reveled in the influences of Pop artists (Rauschenberg, Johns, and Rivers) on the underground attitudes and styles of experimental films.<sup>71</sup> Applying the imagery of insurgence and revolt, Vogel conjured the overthrow of conventional aesthetic and moral systems: "Artists and poets are invading the medium, seducing the financiers with their Arabian fantasies and ... playing havoc with long-established, not-so-eternal truths." As the "new," "young" and implicitly metropolitan cinema movement questioned all manner of convention, good-bad taste contributed to the "havoc" played with "not-so-eternal truths."<sup>72</sup>

Vogel also appreciated "the growing pre-eminence in commercial cinema" of the "spiritual children of 'L'Avventura,' 'Breathless,' 'Hiroshima, Mon Amour,'" including on his list What's New, Pussycat?.<sup>73</sup> Released only a few months before the New York Film Festival, Pussycat marked a breakthrough in the commercialization of the metropolitan, campy sensibility of good-bad taste, to the horror of middlebrow critics, fulfilling Meehan's observation that "in many areas of American cultural life, Camp taste is becoming dominant over what is generally accepted as good taste."<sup>74</sup>



Peter Sellers and Peter O'Toole, What's New Pussycat?

### **A Camp 'Catastrophe**

Objections to What's New, Pussycat? lacked the Legion's denunciation, but they coincided closely with the impassioned hectoring of Kiss Me, Stupid. The urban taste for art films with nudity, sexual explicitness and stylistic innovations drove reviewers to distinguish both films as vulgar and commercial, not art. Unlike Stupid, Pussycat resembled an art film in its fragmented narrative of surreal, improvisatory scenes and dialogue, parodic and reflexive allusions to other films, and frank sexuality. The furor over Pussycat exemplified a "struggle over art," one that Bourdieu (quoted earlier) asserts always includes disputes over a corresponding "art of living." The "struggle" here, as reviewers perceived it, pertained to Pussycat's "sacrilegious reuniting of tastes" and transgression of petty-bourgeois values.<sup>75</sup> The film trumpeted its urban sensibility by subjecting the European art movie to good-bad taste, intruding into the dominion of the "art" movie to despoil bourgeois values and advocate unorthodox schemata of taste and living: metropolitan, underground, and subversive.

Pussycat wastes no time signaling its ironic self-consciousness, parody of foreign movies, and satire of sexual conventions. Not fifteen minutes in, Parisian playboy Peter O'Toole climbs into the shower fully clothed with the naked Romy Schneider, who asks him, "Shall I get dressed? Or is it foreign-movie time?" The bulk of the film amounts to "foreign-movie time," from O'Toole's 8 1/2 dream (in a black fedora and cape, he wields a whip among his lovers) to the height of épater les bourgeois, à la Godard: as O'Toole renounces philandering and valorizes monogamy, "Author's Message" flashes furiously on the screen. Of course, the film's sexual anarchy also evokes "foreign movies": Paula Prentiss' suicidal, nymphomaniacal go-go girl/poet; Capucine, who alternately chases men and blows a police whistle to fend them off; and Ursula Andress, whose parachuting hobby "helps sublimate my sexual tensions. It's either that or promiscuity." Pussycat also references homosexuality and other sexual "perversions" of the day. During group therapy, a male patient gazes longingly at O'Toole, savagely chases him up a curtain, then is whipped into submission by psychoanalyst Sellers using a bouquet and belting "Springtime in Vienna." The climactic sequence transpires at a "kinky hotel"<sup>76</sup> whose "typical clientele" include "Two lovers of indeterminate sex" in one room, "two men" in another, and a "gentleman" in the "Marquis de Sade" suite who orders room service: "12 loaves of bread and a Boy Scout uniform." Metropolitan sexual deviance and "far out" style define the film, in the Parisian setting that underscores its foreign art cinema roots, its improvisational feel and reflexive vulgarity, and Woody Allen's script, which accentuates the New York neurosis and art film adoration of his cult stand-up routines.



Many reviewers undertook a mission to unmask the demented identity reflected by What's New, Pussycat?'s fragmented form and tastelessness. Dementia and deviance would not be problems with actual art films, so critics aimed to expose the movie as a phony, commercial exploitation of stylistic experimentation, a hollow, decadent, disturbing mess lacking unity, depth, purpose, and control. The film personified urban chaos, culturally and socially, a sentiment materialized in the comment from Newsweek, "it batters the senses with the mindless insistence of a discoteque loudspeaker."<sup>77</sup>

Where Vogel welcomed What's New, Pussycat? as one of the "children of Breathless," Harriet R. Polt, in a Film Quarterly essay from spring 1966, characterized such kinship as destructive. Polt distinguished the "cheaply come by and irrelevant" stylization of Pussycat from the "meaningful" stylization of Breathless (1960) and other art films, trying to prevent stylization from turning into "a fashionable fillip to be given to every new, 'mod,' or 'camp' picture."<sup>78</sup> "What's New, Pussycat? and many of the Nouvelle Vague films, notably Breathless" exemplified art film traits, but Pussycat merely mimicked the insurgent, meaningful techniques that Breathless innovated and made "fashionable," including "the chase," "quick cutting," "out-and-out fantasy," and "allusions to past films."<sup>79</sup>

Pussycat "simply has the effects added on" through stylization "used as an end in itself,"<sup>80</sup> a violation of the bourgeois aesthetic conventions of autonomous art: the unification of form and content; motivated stylization; the concept of a whole work of art.<sup>81</sup> In authentic art films, "stylization" served "an inseparable and integral contribution to the film," obeying the "virtues" of "internal logic" according to genre, story and character.<sup>82</sup> Pussycat's superficial stylization and "hyped-up eroticism" combined with a plot "too flimsy to hold together," shattering the "subterranean logic and relevance" of authentic art films.<sup>83</sup>

The same bourgeois principles about autonomous art had fueled popular reviewers' harangues when What's New, Pussycat? hit theatres, and in Newsweek's piece, the concomitant project of exposing Pussycat as an art film forgery: "But the whole nasty business is tricked up to look like an exotic flowering of the avant-garde cinema—frenetic, disjointed (above all disjointed) ... Free form becomes no form ..."<sup>84</sup> Richard Schickel's Life magazine review similarly observed, "No plot whatever develops ... just more situations, each less logical and connected," such as the "lengthy unmotivated chase"; in short, "Pussycat has no internal rationale or logic."<sup>85</sup> Among Crowther's many articles slamming the film, he referred to Pussycat as "the loosest-jointed film"<sup>86</sup> that defied explanation because "so aimlessly is it written and so wildly is it played."<sup>87</sup>

Pussycat's references to other movies might have been inspired by art cinema but at the price of "plot" and "internal logic." Schickel and Philip Hartung of Commonweal both viewed the pastiche as a sign of the film's failed bid for status, in the terms of good-bad taste, as "in," "far out" or "campy."<sup>88</sup> Hartung questioned why "a comedy that means to be so far out ... is amazingly clogged with clichés": a reflexive cameo by Richard Burton, the 8 1/2 scene, "and many psychiatry jokes."<sup>89</sup> Schickel situated the film similarly to Polt in another trend of good-bad taste: the "insy, funsy, hippy, zippy" and "fashionable" trend of "Camp." Trying to be "very, very hip," Allen's screenplay respected "one of the cult's favorite sub-notions" by citing the "just too-much popular styles of other eras,"

but forgot "that style is ... not an end in itself."<sup>90</sup>

Some reviewers explicated their concerns about Pussycat's good-bad taste as a sign of "decadence" and symptom of mental and social malaise. Polt assigned a value-laden label to the "excessive borrowing from past works": "decadence in the terminology of art historians. Aesthetic (and moral) prophets of doom, take note!"<sup>91</sup> And later in the essay: "Style per se, like camp aesthetics, is momentarily amusing, but finally a dead end. Perhaps this is true decadence."<sup>92</sup> States of mental and social decline pervaded Crowther's rebukes of Pussycat, a film of "neurotic decadence," "startling and disturbing in its positive unwholesomeness," and which "devolves as it goes into a wallow in slapstick sexuality and vandalistic antagonism toward the disciplines of society."<sup>93</sup> As Crowther explained earlier, Pussycat and other "absurd" films were "more expressive of madness than wit," "anarchistic burlesques."<sup>94</sup> Forging the middlebrow association between good-bad taste and psychosocial dysfunction, Crowther called Pussycat "the most outrageously cluttered and campy, noisy and neurotic display of what is evidently intended as way-out slapstick ..."<sup>95</sup>

Schickel pointedly associated the outré "Camp" of Pussycat with mental illness, psychic immaturity, and sexual perversion, as "regressive in its self-assertiveness. It is juvenilia. Which is why, of course, those pathetically arrested people, the homosexuals, are leading Camp followers." Pussycat's aberrant "juvenilia" approximated "an awful home movie in which a hopelessly indulgent father ... has allowed his camera to run and run, while his smug and bratty children grow sillier and sillier, naughtier and naughtier."<sup>96</sup> Crowther imagined an even more depraved, infantile "psychopathic strain" in the film, "as though the characters were all disturbed children engaged in violent, sex-tinged water-play."<sup>97</sup> Newsweek also constructed Pussycat as a perverse preschool for maladjusted adults, a film that "recommends itself 'For Adults Only,'" but, "is only for adults who are willing to accept childish prattle about sex blocks, nymphomania, aphrodisiacs, virgins, sin and orgies as a substitute for adult entertainment."<sup>98</sup> Lacking aesthetic order and unity, Pussycat's "sex-tinged," "smut-prone" jokes, situations and characters trumpeted a demented "art of living" (as Bourdieu terms it), "homosexual," "pathetically arrested," "childish," "self-indulgent," "neurotic" and "psychopathic."

Crowther inspired one Times reader to denounce the critic's tirades as "the giveaways of the generation of taste that he is a member of." Speaking for the "young people of 1965," New Yorker Robert A. Friedman defended What's New, Pussycat? through a "contemporary" perspective on "taste" that negated the "standard" of Crowther's traditional aesthetic and moral criteria "to judge what is good and real."<sup>99</sup> "The picture is written aimlessly and wildly," Friedman reasoned, "because it is realistic. It is an articulation of the contemporary scene that the reviewer has no knowledge of." Friedman also questioned Crowther's petty-bourgeois principles in attacking Pussycat as "'unwholesome' and 'antagonistic toward the discipline of society,'" explaining that his generation neglected to "see the humor in wholesomeness nor the value of the disciplines of society" when the class system primed "high school dropouts" as "cannon fodder" in Vietnam.<sup>100</sup> Actually, Friedman was only half right. Youth culture could "see the humor in wholesomeness" and "the disciplines of society," but only in the terms of good-bad taste, as failed seriousness, camp, or put-on, such as in the hysterical "Author's Message" that flashes when O'Toole debunks his debauchery and vows monogamy.<sup>101</sup>

Like the inhabitants of Times Square portrayed in 1960 by the New York Times, What's New, Pussycat? proved to be a "gaudy index" of things to come in the arts and society. The imperative of "the contemporary scene" to rethink "what is good and real," culturally and socially, was reflected in Pussycat and its widespread popular appeal, and formed the urban, new sensibility constitutive of the New Hollywood art film.<sup>102</sup> A comparison of two magazine articles from 1967, often considered the year of New Hollywood's flowering, seals the associations among metropolitan good-bad taste, New Hollywood films, and their audiences.

"The Put-On" from The New Yorker and "The Shock of Freedom in Films" in Time both observed the triumph of good-bad taste (without using that term) throughout the mainstream and counterculture, as well as a corresponding picture of the groups (and implicitly lifestyles) that promoted this sensibility. In "The Put-On," Jacob Brackman unraveled the "basis of a new mode of communication" evident in Pop art, stardom (Twiggy, the Beatles and Dylan), subcultures and political groups, novels (The Magic Christian), films (Casino Royale, Harper), and the overarching trend of "manufactured Camp."<sup>103</sup> Brackman's description of the literary put-on repeated sentiments from any number of reviews for What's New, Pussycat?: "An anything-goes spirit of apocalyptic laughter serves as a rationale for any extravagance and for the dramatization of brutal and regressive fantasies."<sup>104</sup> And in the cinematic genre of "spoof thriller" Brackman detected qualities of excess, fragmentation, and reflexivity comparable to assessments of Pussycat: the dismissal of "plot"; the "offhand lampooning of famous sequences from other films ... public figures ... political events ... homosexuality ... cultural fads"; and depicting "life" through scrambled genres and modes, as "musical-thriller-comedy, sentimental, rough, satirical, melodramatic, impressionistic, realistic, and on and on."<sup>105</sup> Put-on films also showed "disregard for the moral and technical problems posed by one's material."<sup>106</sup> Inasmuch as Brackman's characterizations of the literary and cinematic put-on evoked perceptions of good-bad taste, urban fads, and Pussycat from two years before, they also foresaw Time's rendering of "The New Cinema" six months later.

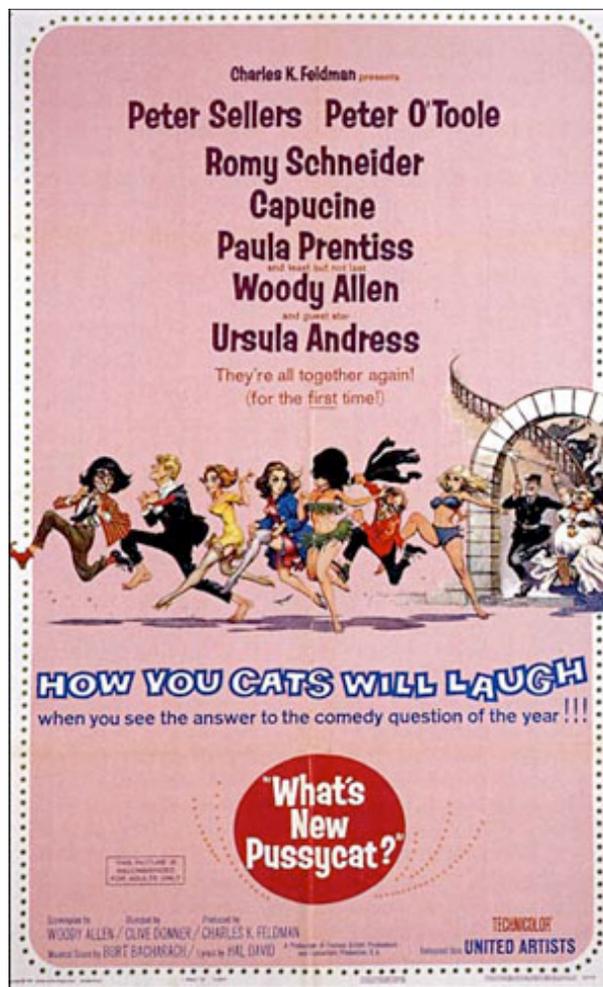
Time launched its cover story "The Shock of Freedom in Films" with an example from Bonnie and Clyde especially redolent of the "apocalyptic laughter," "offhand lampooning," and generic confusion of Brackman's put-on: "In the midst of an uproariously funny bank robbery... the tone of the scene shifts in a split second from humor to horror..."<sup>107</sup> The article enumerated other elements of Hollywood's "new kind of movie" reminiscent of reviews for What's New, Pussycat? and Brackman's put-on: "Plot can diminish in a

forest of effects and accidents, motivations can be done away with"; "Comedy and tragedy are no longer separate masks"; movies "[cast] a coolly neutral eye on ... humanity's most perverse moods and modes," "once shocking themes" such as addiction, homosexuality, and racism; the new films solicited "sympathy toward its anti-heroes" and combined art film techniques with "low comedy."<sup>108</sup>

"The Put-On" and "Shock of Freedom in Films" also defined the same audience for these new aesthetics, the "generation coming of age" as Brackman put it,<sup>109</sup> skeptical of a middlebrow and petty bourgeois "art of living ... which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness" (paraphrasing Bourdieu).<sup>110</sup> Time portrayed the "growing mass audience" as "the young," "prepared for change and experiment both by life and art. It has seen—and accepted—the questioning of moral traditions, the demythologizing of ideals, the pulverizing of esthetic principles ..."<sup>111</sup> Brackman generalized that this generation "suspects not only art but the whole range of modern experience," the "art of the put-on" a "weapon" for exposing the "giant con games everywhere."<sup>112</sup> The put-on suffused, according to Brackman, the practices, groups, and trends of youth culture: anti-war, Black Power and gay activists; rock'n'roll stars; Pop artists; and Hollywood films.<sup>113</sup>

In style and attitude, What's New, Pussycat? broke through the boundaries of taste tested and tripped over by Kiss Me, Stupid, preparing the route for an emerging New Hollywood art cinema and mainstream audience. Although Time listed different predecessors—Psycho (1960), Lolita (1961), The Manchurian Candidate (1962), and Dr. Strangelove (1964)<sup>114</sup>—the particular comedic orientations of Stupid and Pussycat distinguished them. All of the films listed above and most of the iconic New Hollywood pictures previously inventoried portray social transgression with tragic results, a political critique of social limits that nonetheless revealed vestiges of the Code's law of compensations for sinners. Stupid, and to a much greater extent Pussycat, affirmed transgressions of morality, sexuality and taste with happy endings. The mutual infidelities of Stupid's married couple prove a boon to their relationship. The wedding that closes Pussycat offers no hope for the already bickering newlyweds, but psychotherapist Sellers addresses the audience with a smile and wonders, "Maybe I've gained another patient."

After a brief reprise of the sublime theme song under the closing credits, ten grinning animated cherubs in cat masks appear and moon the audience, "the end." Pussycat's revelry stems from a strikingly joyous break from bourgeois morality: glee over a marriage's failure, and even more fun, kinky cartoons and Tom Jones' ecstatic belting. This was more than a typical conclusion to a commercial sex comedy. Considering the social history evoked in the film and its reception in 1965—the student movement, rising gay visibility, the sexual revolution—the content, tone and style of Pussycat's conclusion underscored Bourdieu's ideas about comedy, quoted at the start of this paper, "the taste for and sense of revelry, the free speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties."<sup>115</sup>



In form, content, and address, Pussycat represented an incipient urban sensibility that maintained, according to the letter-writer cited above that “there is no standard by which to judge what is good and real.” Such a credo applied to critiques of the middlebrow and petty bourgeois establishment, from aesthetic sensibilities to lifestyles, but it did not preclude an establishment film such as Pussycat from commercial success. This sex comedy’s style, content, and address all “apprehended” a kind of spectator, to use Schoonover’s term, one that could appreciate the film’s sensibility of the “simultaneously artful and trashy,” but not necessarily just the distanced “bystanders” in Schoonover’s account about art film audiences in the late 1940s.<sup>116</sup> Pussycat addressed and validated the taste publics characterized by commentators on camp and good-bad taste in 1965, as well as the practitioners of the put-on and audiences of “new” films described in 1967; the film spoke to, at least in part, an audience of participants, such as Robert A. Friedman.

Based on its popularity with audiences, this sex comedy helped initiate the movement away from Hollywood’s “small town” values and middleclass image, as well as the petty-bourgeois and middlebrow tenets of aesthetics and morality dictating mainstream taste. Its stylistic experimentation, narrative disorder, moral ambivalence, and sexualized neurosis anticipated such diverse yet iconic New Hollywood movies as Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, The Graduate, The Producers (1968), Myra Breckinridge (1970), M\*A\*S\*H (1970), and Watermelon Man (1970). Pussycat’s commercialization of campy, “far out” sexual antics, self-parody, androgyny, reflexivity, and narrative fragmentation also impacted television markets, as indicated by Batman, The Monkees, Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In, and The Flip Wilson Show. By the late 1960s, numerous Hollywood films, network television shows, and their audiences understood and embraced the distinctly metropolitan good taste of bad taste.

## NOTES

Many thanks to the following folks for their invaluable contributions to this work: Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake; Karen McNally; Pamela Wojcik; Jessica Wilton; Michael Selig; Eric Schaefer; Carl Perry at the Boston Public Library; Emerson College Library’s Ian Thistle, Maria Camaio, and Martha Seeger; Jennie DiBartolomeo; the insightful readers at Mediascape; students in my Camp/Cult and Sex, Comedy and Hollywood courses at Emerson; and, as always, Michael S. Keane, whose “far out” lovin’ is no put-on.

1. Greg Taylor. Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. 91-95, 118-120. Although the sensibilities and practices labeled here bear specific histories and subcultural origins, mainstream commentators of the 1960s tended to lump them into an all-encompassing master narrative of good-bad taste. See Thomas Meehan. “Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste—It’s ‘Camp.’” New York Times. 21Mar. 1965: 30-31. 113-115. See also “Camp.” Time. 11 Dec. 1964: 24; and Gloria Steinem. “A Vest-Pocket Guide to Camp.”

- Life. 20 Aug. 1965: 84. See also: Ken Feil. "Talk about Bad Taste': Camp, Cult, and the Reception of What's New, Pussycat?" Convergence Media History. Eds. Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake. New York: Routledge, 2009.; and Feil. "Esthetically As Well As Morally Repulsive': Kiss Me, Stupid, 'Bilious' Billy, and the Battle of Middlebrow Taste." Untitled Billy Wilder collection. Ed. Karen McNally. Jefferson: McFarland Press, forthcoming. This essay expands on those works.
2. This process dated back to the releases of the sex comedies The Moon Is Blue (1953) and Baby Doll (1956), as well as the Greek production Never On Sunday (1960). All of these sex comedies prevailed at the box office despite lacking PCA seals and receiving "Condemned" ratings from the Legion of Decency, proof to many of the Code's flaws and necessity for an age-based ratings system. Baby Doll's comedy of sexual dysfunction, appeal to urban audiences, and critics' comparisons of it to "European" (read: sexual, adult) films marked another precedent for New Hollywood films. See, for instance: "'Moon Is Blue' Due Despite Attacks." New York Times. 26 June 1953: 16.; Bosley Crowther. "The Screen In Review." New York Times. 9 July 1953: 18.; "Old Movie Taboos Eased In New Code For Film Industry." New York Times. 12 Dec. 1956: 1; Mae Tinee. "Four Strange Lives Unfold In 'Baby Doll.'" Chicago Daily Tribune. 31 Dec. 1956: 14; Bosley Crowther. "The Proper Drama Of Mankind." New York Times. 6 Jan. 1957: D1; Tino Balio. United Artists: The Company That Challenged The Film Industry. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. 64-71, 127, 228.
3. For a sense of how taste definitions are legislated through the reception of sex comedies, it is also worth considering Some Like It Hot (1959), The Apartment (1960), and Irma La Douce (1963), as well as John Goldfarb, Please Come Home (1965). See Feil, "Esthetically As Well As Morally Repulsive.'
4. On the origins of mass camp, see: Barbara Klinger, Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. 132-156.
5. Violence also plays a part in these struggles over tasteful content. See, for instance, "The Shock of Freedom in Films." Time. 8 Dec. 1967; Time.com. 21 July 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,844256,00.html>; William Paul. Laughing Screaming. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 28-30. For Paul, the revolution of taste and film content begins with violence, as exhibited in Psycho (1960) and its initial airing on network television in 1964.
6. Mark Betz. "Art, exploitation, underground." Defining Cult Movies. Eds. Mark Jancovich, et al. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. 202-222; Karl Schoonover. "The Comfort of Carnage: Neorealism and America's World Understanding." Convergence Media History. Eds. Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake. New York: Routledge, 2009. 127-138.
7. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin. Queer Images. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. 119-124; J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum. Midnight Movies. New York: Da Capo Press, 1991. 46-50, 61; Janet Staiger. Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 134-144; Juan A. Suárez. Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. 91-94; Taylor 108-112. The expressions "new sensibility" and "good taste of bad taste were popularized by Susan Sontag in "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964) and "One Culture and the New Sensibility" (1965); see Against Interpretation and Other Essays. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966. 275-304.
8. Thomas Elsaesser. "American Auteur Cinema." The Last Great American Picture Show. Eds. Thomas Elsaesser, et al. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004. 37; David Thomson. "The Decade When Movies Mattered." Elsaesser, et al., 74-75; Maitland McDonagh. "The Exploitation Generation, or: How Marginal Movies Came in from the Cold." Elsaesser, et al., 114; Alexander Horwath. "A Walking Contradiction." Elsaesser, et al., 83-84; Jonathan Rosenbaum. "New Hollywood and the Sixties Meltingpot." Elsaesser, et al., 131-144; Benshoff and Griffin, 159-160; Staiger, 146-148; Suárez, 261; Taylor, 119.
9. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. Film History: An Introduction. Second Edition. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003. 515-520; Geoff King. New Hollywood Cinema. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 11-48; Vincent Canby. "Public Not Afraid Of Big Bad 'Woolf'." New York Times. 25 June 1966: 20; Robin Wood. Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. 11-25; Elsaesser. "American Auteur Cinema." 37; Thomson. "The Decade When Movies Mattered." 74-75; McDonagh. "The Exploitation Generation." 114; Horwath. "A Walking Contradiction." 83-84; Rosenbaum. "New Hollywood and the Sixties Meltingpot." 131-144; Benshoff and Griffin, 159-160; Staiger, 146-148; Suárez, 261; Taylor, 119; "The Shock of Freedom in Films."
10. Paul, Laughing Screaming. 31.
11. Pierre Bourdieu. "The aristocracy of culture." Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader. Eds. Richard Collins, et al. London: Sage Publications, 1986. 178.
12. For extensive textual analyses of 1950s sex comedies as transgressive, see Ed Sikov, Laughing Hysterically: American Screen Comedy of the 1950s. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. For a comparison of Moon Is Blue to Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? as anti-marriage comedies, see Alan Jacobson, "Let's Talk About Sex, Baby: Revisiting Preminger's The Moon Is Blue." Bright Lights. Nov. 2004, Brightlightsfilm.com 6 July 2007, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/46/moon.htm>.
13. Bourdieu, "The aristocracy of culture." 186-187.
14. Ibid. 192-193.
15. Herbert Gans. Popular Culture and High Culture. New York: Basic Books, 1999. 109.
16. Bourdieu, "The aristocracy of culture." 193.
17. Thomas Schatz. "The New Hollywood." Film Theory Goes to the Movies. Eds. Collins. New York: Routledge, 1993. 14.
18. Variety. "A Kick Instead For 'Kiss Me, Stupid'." 9 Dec. 1964: 5; "Legion of Decency Condemns A Movie." New York Times. 3 Dec. 1964: 57.
19. Robert Sklar. Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies. New York: Vintage Books, 1976. 174; Ruth Vasey. The World According to Hollywood. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. 21, 103.
20. Douglas W. Churchill. "Hollywood Heeds the Thunder." New York Times. 22 July 1934: Sunday Magazine, 1; Charles Collins. "Clean Cinema Movement May Affect Drama." Chicago Daily Tribune. 24 June 1934: D3; "Hollywood Adopts Hays Movie Ethics; Dry Law No Joke!," Chicago Daily Tribune. 1 Apr. 1930: 37; "Legion of Decency." Time. 11 June 1934, Time.com. 2 Feb. 2007,

- <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,762190,00.html>; "RKO Head Orders Clean-Up Of Films." New York Times. 2 July 1934: 24; "Legion of Decency (Cont'd)." Time. 2 July 1934. Time.com. 2 Feb. 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,754325,00.html>.
21. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. 130-131, 135.
22. Lawrence Knopp. "Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis." Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities. Eds. David Bell and Gill Valentine. New York: Routledge, 1995. 150.
23. See, for instance, "Legion of Decency (Cont'd)" and "Movie Trade, Feeling Attacks, To Be 'Careful,' Code Says." New York Times. 25 June 1934: 17.
24. Henry Jenkins. What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992. 159, 162-166, 211-212; Vasey, 23, 102-104. Of course, Vasey's argument about the Code is more international in scope, tracing the Studio Relations Committee's and PCA's efforts to police film content to enhance and maintain Hollywood's opportunities for film distribution in foreign markets: 141-193.
25. Bart. "Hollywood's Morality Code Undergoing First Major Revisions in 35 Years." New York Times. 7 Apr. 1965: 37.
26. Collins, "Clean Cinema Movement May Affect Drama." D3.
27. Churchill, "Hollywood Heeds the Thunder." 1.
28. Churchill, 1; "RKO Head Orders Clean-Up Of Films." 24.
29. Frank Miller. "Particular Applications of the Code {Addenda to 1930 Code}." Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin, and Violence on Screen. Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1994. 295-296.
30. Miller, 50-54; 78-83. Of course, exploitation films were an exception, enabled by their marginal distribution. See Eric Schaefer. Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
31. For a reference to Code-approved film "for 'family audiences,'" see "Legion of Decency (Cont'd)."
32. Tino Balio. Introduction to Part One. Hollywood in the Age of Television. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 7; Janet Staiger. Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. 183.
33. Thomas H. Guback. "Hollywood's International Market." The American Film Industry. Ed. Tino Balio. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. 477; Balio. United Artists. 222-223; Staiger. Interpreting Films. 192-195. See also, Richard S. Randall. "Censorship: From The Miracle to Deep Throat." The American Film Industry. 510-517.
34. "Vatican Movie Unit Rates U.S. Films Over Europeans." New York Times. 19 Feb. 1965: 27. The bracketing of the word "moral" occurs in the original article.
35. Bosley Crowther. "Bad Taste In Films." X1; Bart. "Europe's Successes Worry Hollywood." 5.
36. Balio, United Artists. 127, 228.
37. Robert C. Allen. "The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment." The American Film Industry. 81.
38. Crowther. "Bad Taste In Films." New York Times. 6 Sept. 1964, X1.
39. Peter Bart. "Europe's Successes Worry Hollywood." New York Times. 20 Sept. 1965: 5.
40. For a brief discussion of the landmark "Adults Only" film The Carpetbaggers (1964), see Feil, "Esthetically and Morally Repulsive."
41. "Pasternak Says 'Everybody' Today Risking Filth." Variety. 9 Dec. 1964: 5. In 1965 just following the Stupid controversy, Bosley Crowther wrote that "the flow of films of a cheap and sordid nature" motivated state and local groups to censor films and pass legislation to permit censorship or age restrictions. See "The Heat Is On Films." New York Times. 17 Jan. 1965: X1.
42. Stallybrass and White. The Politics and Poetics of Transgression. 130-131, 135.
43. A.H. Weiler. "'Kiss Me, Stupid'." New York Times. 23 Dec. 1964: 22; Brendan Gill. "The Current Cinema." New Yorker. 74; Philip T. Hartung. "The Screen." Commonweal. 421-422.
44. Mae Tinee. "New Wilder Film Crude and Clumsy." Chicago Daily Tribune. 21 Dec. 1964: A2.
45. Thomas Thompson. "Wilder's Dirty-Joke Film Stirs a Furor." Life. 15 Jan. 1965: 51, 53.
46. "Hipster's Harlot." Time. 1 Jan. 1965: 69. See also "Esthetically and Morally Repulsive." In which I delve more deeply into the role of Wilder's authorship in the reception of Kiss Me, Stupid.
47. "Moral or Immoral." 53-54. See also "Wilder's Work to Be Shown At Museum of Modern Art." New York Times. 25 Nov. 1964: 45
48. "Moral or Immoral?" Newsweek. 28 Dec. 1964: 54. See "Esthetically..." for an analysis of the Newsweek and Vogue reviews of Kiss Me, Stupid as cultist testimonies.
49. Joan Didion. "Kiss Me, Stupid, 'minority report'." Vogue. 1 Mar. 1965: 97.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Bart. "When the Cookie Crumbled." X11. Ed Sikov contrasts the classical style of Wilder and Stupid to "younger directors like Richard Lester" and his film A Hard Day's Night, remarking that Stupid "may seem in retrospect like a harbinger of the sexually liberating 1960s, but ... it was notably out of synch with its era": Ed Sikov. On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder. New York: Hyperion, 1998. 479. On Wilder in the context of New Hollywood, see Richard T. Jameson. "Dinosaurs in the Age of the Cinemobile." The Last Great American Picture Show. Eds. Thomas Elsaesser, et al. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004. 155-156.
53. Douglas W. Cray. "Sidelights." New York Times. 24 June 1965: 50; Peter Bart. "When the Cookie Crumbled." New York Times. 7 Nov. 1965: X11; "The Gross Is Greener." Time. 14 Jan. 1966. Time.Com. 2 Feb. 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835003,00.html>; "United Artists Sets Profit Mark." New York Times. 2 Dec. 1965: 65.
54. For comparisons of Stupid and Pussycat, see: Philip T. Hartung. "The Screen." Commonweal. 2 July 1965: 474; "American Humor: Hardly a Laughing Matter." Time. 4 Mar. 1966, Time.com 2 Feb. 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,835213,00.html>.
55. Suárez observes the critical charge against the underground films for being fashionable. See Suárez, 94.

56. For an exhaustive bibliography of sources on camp, see Fabio Cleto, ed. Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999. 459-512.
57. Meehan, "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste—It's 'Camp'." 30.
58. Ibid. 30, 113. Prior to and during the outpouring caused by "Notes on Camp," reports about the New York Underground cinema movement supported all of these associations. See Staiger (2000) and Suárez.
59. Steinem, "A Vest-Pocket Guide to Camp." 84.
60. "Camp," Time. 24.
61. Ibid.
62. Milton Bracker. "Life on W. 42d St. A Study in Decay." New York Times. 14 Mar. 1960: 26.
63. "Camp." Time. 24. See also Sontag, 289.
64. Staiger, 142-144; Suarez, 87-94
65. Jacob Brackman. "The Put-on." The New Yorker. 24 June 1967: 34-73; John Enck. "Campop." Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature. Summer 1966: 168-182; Harriet R. Polt. "Notes on the New Stylization." Film Quarterly. 19 (Spring 1966): 25-29.
66. Calvin Trillin. "Barnett Frummer and Rosalie Mondle Meet Superman: A Love Story." New Yorker. 17 Apr. 1965: 41.
67. Ibid.
68. Trillin, 41-42. Trillin also provided a litany of camp activities and interests in the mid-1960s: Scopitone bars, movie and comic book cults, Pop art, and favored publications (Wyoming Quarterly, Partisan Review, National Enquirer). For instance, see Sontag, 277. See also: "Old Bogart Films Packing Them In." New York Times. 28 Jan. 1965: 19; Meehan, 113; "The Return of Batman." Time. 26 Nov. 1965. 3 Feb. 2007. ; Rita Reif. "Scopitone Jukebox Plays at Fashionable Parties." New York Times. 12 Dec. 1964: 24.
69. Trillin, "Barnett Frummer." 43.
70. Amos Vogel. "Films: Fashion of the Fashionable." New York Times. 5 Sept. 1965: X7. Suárez cites Vogel's disapproval of the underground in 1966, however, because it is "fashionable": Bike Boys, 94.
71. On Vogel's hostility to camp, see Staiger, Perverse Spectators, 142; Suárez, Bike Boys, 91-94. Vogel's embrace of pop could be explained by the homophobic distinctions behind these terms. See Sasha Torres, "'The Caped Crusader of Camp: Pop, Camp, and the Batman Television Series.'" Cleto. 334-335.
72. Vogel, "Films: Fashion of the Fashionable." X7.
73. Ibid.
74. Meehan, "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste—It's 'Camp'." 114.
75. Bourdieu, "The aristocracy of culture." 185-186; 192-193
76. "What's New, Pussycat?" Esquire. November, 1965: 37.
77. "Out of Joint." Newsweek. 12 July 1965: 91.
78. Polt, "Notes on the New Stylization." 29.
79. Ibid. 25-26, 27.
80. Ibid. 27.
81. Peter Bürger. A Theory of the Avant-Garde. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. 55-59, 72-82.
82. Polt, "Notes on the New Stylization." 27, 29.
83. Ibid. 27, 29.
84. "Out of Joint." Newsweek. 12 July 1965: 91.
85. Richard Schickel. "A Witless Junket to Too-Muchville." Life. 9 July 1965: 12.
86. Bosley Crowther. "The Screen." New York Times. 23 June 1965: 49.
87. Bosley Crowther. "Is This Cinema of the Absurd?" 27 June 1965: X5.
88. Time viewed the film's "rummaging eclectically through a whole range of comedy styles," similar to Crowther's comment that the film's "many imitative tricks" warranted a title change: "'What's New, Copycat?'" See "Tired Tabby." Time. 2 July 1965, Time.Com, 2 Feb. 2007. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,833887,00.html>; Crowther, "The Screen" (1965): 49.
89. Philip T. Hartung. "The Screen." Commonweal. 2 July 1965: 473.
90. Polt, 26
91. Ibid. 27.
92. Crowther, "Is This Cinema of the Absurd?" X1, X5.
93. Ibid. X1.
94. Schickel, 12.
95. Crowther, "The Screen" (1965): 49.
96. "Out of Joint," 90-91.
97. "Readers Appraise Two New Films." New York Times. 18 July 1965: X11.
98. Ibid.
99. For a "put-on" letter that valorized Crowther's opinions about Pussycat, see Saul Kent, "Readers Appraise Two New Films," X11. See also Feil, "'Talk about Bad Taste,'" 225.
100. Ibid.
101. For a "put-on" letter that valorized Crowther's opinions about Pussycat, see Saul Kent, "Readers Appraise Two New Films," X11. See also Feil, "'Talk about Bad Taste,'" 225.
102. I am not arguing here, however, that all New Hollywood films were reducible to camp, cult, the put-on, or the far out, nor that all

mainstream audiences embraced good-bad taste, per se.

103. Brackman, "The Put-on," 34-73. Brackman discusses modernist and postmodern art as well as popular entertainment and politics, views especially interesting in considering the convergence of good-bad taste with the "put-on," "manufactured Camp," and theories of postmodern culture. See, for instance, Pamela Wojcik's comparisons of camp to postmodernism in [Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna](#). Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 4-5; 120-124.

104. Brackman, "The Put-on." 44.

105. Ibid. 46.

106. Ibid. 50.

107. "The Shock of Freedom in Films." [Time](#). 8 Dec. 1967.

108. Ibid.

109. Brackman, "The Put-on." 73.

110. Bourdieu, "The aristocracy of culture." 193.

111. "The Shock of Freedom in Films." [Time](#). 8 Dec. 1967.

112. Brackman, "The Put-on." 73.

113. Ibid. 52, 57-58, 60.

114. "The Shock of Freedom in Films." [Time](#). 8 Dec. 1967.

115. Bourdieu, "The aristocracy of culture." 178. Italics are mine.

116. Schoonover, "The Comfort of Carnage." 129-131, 134, 137.



**Author bio:**

[Ken Feil](#) is Scholar-in-Residence at Emerson College. He is the author of [Dying For A Laugh: Disaster Movies and The Camp Imagination](#) (Wesleyan University Press, 2006), "'Talk About Bad Taste': Camp, Cult, and the Reception of [What's New, Pussycat?](#)" in [Convergence Media History](#) (edited by Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake, Routledge Press, 2009), and "'Esthetically As Well As Morally Repulsive': [Kiss Me, Stupid](#), 'Bilious' Billy, and the Battle of Middlebrow Taste" in an upcoming Billy Wilder collection (edited by Karen McNally, McFarland).

Kiss Me, Stupid and Whatâ€™s New, Pussycat? drew critical hostility from middlebrow pundits of a kind explained by Bourdieu: "The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated." After all, "disapproving of content" defines the occupation of middlebrow critics, Herbert Gans claims, whatever "way of living into arbitrariness." Middlebrow critics fervently railed against Stupid, Pussycat and the very notion of blurring good and bad taste, ostensibly to defend traditional tastes and lifestyles, but such sound and fury also signified their angst-ridden inability to define "legitimate culture," morality, and lifestyles anymore. "Sex, Comedy and Controversy: Kiss Me, Stupid, Whatâ€™s New, Pussycat?, New Hollywood, and Metropolitan Taste," *Mediascape* (Forthcoming, summer 2009). [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall09\\_1960sSexComedy.html](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall09_1960sSexComedy.html). "Talk About Bad Taste": Camp, Cult, and the Reception of Whatâ€™s New, Pussycat? in *Convergence Media History*, Eds. Janet Staiger and Sabine Hake (Routledge Press, 2009). *Dying for a Laugh: Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination* (Weslyan University Press, 2006). *Kiss Me, Stupid* is a 1964 American sex comedy film produced and directed by Billy Wilder and starring Dean Martin, Kim Novak, and Ray Walston. The screenplay by Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond is based on the play *L'ora della fantasia* (*The Dazzling Hour*) by Anna Bonacci, which had inspired *Wife For a Night* (*Moglie per una notte*, 1952), an Italian film starring Gina Lollobrigida. The comic song lyrics were written by Ira Gershwin, using some of George Gershwin's unpublished melodies.