

## The Campiness of Camp

One of the defining features of Camp is that it is a sensibility that does not have a clear-cut definition. Camp, like gender and sexuality, is fluid and indefinite. Camp thrives on craftsmanship, creativity, and sensuality and is deeply grounded as a purely aesthetic phenomenon. Camp represents a highly aestheticized and stylized perception of the world that criticizes oppressive social and political structures. Camp uses irony as a through-line that links crucial elements of Camp together such as artificiality, individuality, humor, and incongruity.

Camp has an interesting history that Sontag's "Notes on Camp" argues can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries "because of that period's extraordinary feeling for artifice, for surface, for symmetry; its taste for the picturesque and the thrilling; its elegant conventions for representing instant feeling and the total presence of character" (Sontag, 280). This brings to mind typical French aristocratic portraits that emphasized uncomfortably puffy wigs, heavy gowns, and ghostly pale skin with unnaturally red cheeks. Although Camp maintained a sense of opulence throughout its history, it shapeshifted over time from the opulence of the aristocracy to that of the dandy.

The dandy is a hero of modernity, an aristocrat of style rather than one of birth. The dandy aims to live life like a work of art rather than passively be a collector of art. The dandy is identified as a symbol of superior taste and cultural refinement. They take an interest in consumption that is typically gendered feminine and reject masculine repression, thereby blurring the gender binary and promoting a queer aesthetic (Felski lecture). The most quintessential example of the dandy is Oscar Wilde, who was one of the first to embody a Camp aesthetic and to represent what Camp looked like as a person with his velvet coats and silk stockings. Wilde promoted British Aestheticism and was committed to the cult of beauty and

pleasure—hedonism over Victorian moralism. Similar to the idea we have of Camp today, Wilde underscored Camp as a style of performance, eccentricity, and individualism as opposed to a style of high culture and pompousness.

Camp's irony is a key element that fuels the political undercurrent of the sensibility. Sontag writes: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks... To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role" (Sontag, 280). Camp's irony overlaps with its artificialness and theatricality—it is ironic precisely because it is absolutely ridiculous and impractical. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibit "Camp: Notes on Fashion" throws irony in viewers' faces with a suit that inflates to accentuate arm and ab muscles, a cheaply made dress covered in designer logos, and a little black dress that has "little black dress" written on it. Camp quotes itself and uncovers the absurdity of sex roles and labels by garishly overexaggerating them. It draws attention to Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance in that Camp highlights the superficiality and unnaturalness of toxic societal gender expectations.

This is done to the point where viewers are distanced from a sense of humanness and reality, yet Camp's irony also serves to underscore a sense of the individuality and personality of the performer. On the one hand, Camp represents a collective individualism of gays as a minority, while on the other hand, Camp is also a mode of self-expression. In "Camp and the Gay Sensibility" Jack Babuscio writes: "As a means to personal liberation through the exploration of experience, camp is an assertion of one's self-integrity—a temporary means of accommodation with society in which art becomes, at one and the same time, an intense mode of individualism and a form of spirited protest. And while camp advocates the dissolution of hard and inflexible moral rules, it pleads, too, for a morality of sympathy" (Babuscio, 42). Camp allows for the expression of an identity that society has denied, rejected, dehumanized, and

vilified—it is about disguise, costume, and role-playing, but it is also about putting forth an illustration of personal taste and experience. Rather than blatantly attacking the social politics of gayness, Camp is a celebration of gay life-worlds and a uniqueness that exists on the fringes of society.

Although Camp has a serious history and connection to gayness, it is essentially an anti-serious form. Camp utilizes a satirical sense of humor that is underlaid by an ironical tone. This style conjures one's inner child, nostalgia, and imagination, thereby deflecting hardship and historical trauma. Camp is sentimental and tender in feeling, and it uses an ironic humor that addresses social hypocrisy in a language that is both playfully accessible but also private in terms of the queer experience. "The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious... One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious," writes Sontag (Sontag, 288). Camp uses humor as a way of rebelling against a puritanical moralism, and instead of trying to integrate and naturalize gayness in society, it chooses to elaborate on and celebrate gayness as difference and otherness—it exudes self-confidence and pride. Camp suggests that the comical and the serious are not antithetical but rather that they can be used to creatively inform one another and engagingly spread awareness about important socio-political causes.

Dissonance and incongruity are also intertwined in Camp's irony in that it juxtaposes disharmonious images to make a socio-political statement about the unjust treatment of gays in society and the ridiculousness of gender binaries. Judith Halberstam writes in "Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance" that drag "describes discontinuities between gender and sex or appearance and reality but refuses to allow this discontinuity to represent dysfunction" (Halberstam, 236). Halberstam goes on to discuss "kinging" and "male realness" in comparison

with the feminine flamboyance of drag queens as examples of incongruity in Camp. While masculinity is perceived as being natural and nonperformative, “femininity reeks of the artificial” (Halberstam, 234). Therefore, one of the reasons drag kings are less popular than drag queens is because “kinging” is “performing nonperformativity” (Halberstam, 259).

Other examples of incongruity are embedded in the way Camp is analyzed and discussed. Camp is playful and humorous yet serious, impractical in form and function but a practical social critique—it is unrealistic and unnatural to bring attention to the realistic and the natural. Sontag writes: “Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (Sontag, 284). Sontag goes on to describe Camp as “a good taste of bad taste” and defends it by claiming “it’s good because it’s awful” (Sontag, 291-292). According to Sontag, “pure Camp is always naïve,” so the most “authentic” strain of Camp is one that is unconscious and unintentional (Sontag, 282). Additionally, Camp is not used as one part of speech and does not describe one particular way of looking—it can be an adjective, verb, or noun and can relate a way of viewing art, life, or a person (Halberstam, 41). Camp is also a physical experience that encompasses many layers: “The term *camp* describes those elements in a person, situation or activity which express, or are created by, a gay sensibility... a relationship between activities, individuals, situations *and* gayness” (Babuscio, 40-41). Camp manages to formally distance itself from the everyday yet is very much grounded within it in terms of how we decide to perform our gender.

Camp manages to take the banal, the everyday, the ordinary, and transform it into something inordinate and extraordinary. It is a socio-political critique that is steeped in collective and personal experience and oppression but, at the end of the day, has an enlightening message for everyone: to be flexible and open-minded and to not take life so seriously.

