

The History and Theory of Camp

The World in the Evening's Charles Kennedy claims that camp is “terribly hard to define” (Isherwood 111), while Susan Sontag insists that to “talk about Camp is [...] to betray it” (275). Like many early scholarly texts on camp, these quotes emphasize how the concept is (supposedly) “notoriously evasive” (Medhurst 276) and defined by “its indefinability, its elusiveness, and its changeability” (Bergman 123). Some of the more recent texts, on the other hand, change the tenor to stress how camp “is so dead. Its ghost whispers can be heard beyond the creaking stairs leading to the attic” (Gaines and Segade). Similarly to Malik Gaines and Alex Segade, who preface this statement with the subheading “Further Notes on the Death of Camp,” David and Harold Galef get their most important point across before their introduction by simply but provocatively using the title “What *was* Camp” (emphasis added) in their study of the phenomenon and its psychological effects in the early 1990s. Running counter to these extreme positions of certainty about camp’s obsolescence, yet *uncertainty* about its specific qualities, queer and feminist theory’s re-evaluation of strategies like mimicry, appropriation, and parody has led to a proliferation of productive inquiry into the ongoing relevance of camp. This strand of scholarship constitutes the basis for my own understanding of camp’s form and function as an excessively stylized parody and in-group humor, capable of intervening in naturalized and naturalizing discourses of gender and sexuality, while granting access to otherwise oppressive systems of meaning- and pleasure-making. This chapter therefore introduces the basic arguments of this re-evaluation of

camp. Furthermore, to situate both my insistence on camp's continued relevance and the position of those who come to different conclusions concerning the legitimacy of contemporary uses of camp, a short history of the strategy and its contexts precedes these theoretical considerations. This sketched history illustrates how camp has evolved from a primarily private code of secret communication to a deconstructive method of cultural critique, and how these seemingly disparate aspects of its use are intimately related to this day.

I STONEWALL, SONTAG, "SISSIES," SIRK

Part of camp's often (wrongly) diagnosed evasiveness can be explained by the fact that camp is firmly rooted in its historically specific origins in gay subculture at the same time as it is fully dependent on its variable contemporary context. Thus, in order to do justice to the complexity and specificity of camp, it is crucial to bear in mind its original status as "a means of communication and survival [for gay people]" (Bronski 42), particularly before the Stonewall riots and the advent of the gay rights movement in the late 1960s. David Bergman calls camp before Stonewall "an argot that provided an oppressed group some measure of coherence, solidarity, and humor" and a way "to talk to one another within the hearing range" of potentially hostile heterosexuals (13). Especially among drag queens, Andy Medhurst stressed, camp served to "undermine the heterosexual normativity through enacting outrageous inversions of aesthetic and gender codes" (279). Anthropologist Ester Newton offered a fascinating study of this in her 1979 publication *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. However, she cautioned that this version of camp was still a "pre- or proto-political phenomenon," as "the camp says, 'I am not like the oppressors' [, but] in doing so he agrees with the oppressors' definition of who he is" (100 n. 21), rather than negating their stigmatizing power.

The notion of stigma is a recurring theme in studies investigating camp's use in the rough timeframe of the 1940s to late 1960s, though later analyses retrospectively view camp in a more transgressive light than did Newton. Fabio Cleto, for example, called it an originally "survivalist strategy (working through a reinscription of stigma)" ("Queering" 8).¹ Sites at which camp is employed in this manner, according to studies from the 1980s onwards, include underground cinema and pulp fiction. In his study of directors like Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, and Kenneth

Anger, Juan Antonio Suárez views expressions of camp not as “adventures in taste as much as war cries, expressions of protest from communities actually claiming social and cultural spaces forcibly denied to them” (105). Gay male pulp is discussed, among others, by Fabio Cleto (in his foreword to Victor J. Banis’ *That Man From C.A.M.P.*) and Michael Bronski (*Pulp Friction*) as an early site of resistance. Even more attention has been paid to lesbian pulp fiction by such authors as Ann Bannon and Vin Packer—due to its larger commercial success and hence more complicated relations to exploitation and voyeurism, and to identity-confirming aspects. Both strands of this low-brow fiction written at the height of paperback success after World War II, Patricia Julianna Smith describes as essential “iconoclasts” in what she calls “the queer sixties”:

these fictions rejected bourgeois morality and affirmed a gay lifestyle outside the bounds of heterosexual expectations. As such, they functioned as a considerable, if generally uncredited, aspect of the groundwork of Gay Liberation movements that would come to the fore in the 1970s and subsequent decades. (xxii)

While her definition of their camp value can still be considered “pre-political,” it is far less passive than Newton’s. Similarly, most accounts of camp’s usage in connection to Hollywood cinema from the 1930s to the 1960s already stress camp’s combination of distancing qualities (in terms of heteronormative values) and communal aspects (in terms of shared queer values and responses), which inform my concept of detached attachment. In his analysis of MGM musicals, Steven Cohan for example, defines camp as a passing strategy which allows queer audiences to take pleasure in the same cultural products as the straight mainstream, yet to “reinvest them queerly” (*Incongruous* 18). With a rare focus solely on the production side and in connection to Marxist investigations of queer labor, Matthew Tinkcom provides a productive insight into camp’s status as a tactic

through which queer men of a particular historical epoch have made sense of their frequent omission from representation and sought to invent their own language to appear, in a particular fashion, in those complicated moments of exchange under capital. (4)

Moreover, Tinkcom is among the few scholars to reflect upon his omission of agents who are not white gay men (21). In general, however, most texts on the early history of camp follow Dyer's conviction that camp is "distinctively and unambiguously gay male" (49). This stance reflects gay and lesbian studies' origin in identity politics, and its resultant interest in uncovering biographies of historical figures and distinctly gay and lesbian forms of cultural production. Jack Babuscio argues in a similar direction with his definition of camp as "a relationship between activities, individuals, situations, *and* gayness" (20, emphasis in the original). He qualifies this statement by clarifying that not all gay men will necessarily respond to camp and that furthermore the person from which the camp product originates (e.g., director Josef von Sternberg), does not have to be gay him- or herself. Instead, he introduces the term "gay sensibility" to denote

a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression. (19)

While he still thinks of this difference from the mainstream as created by gayness, he tentatively opens the discourse to include other forms of (gendered) oppression (28).

However, before camp is rediscovered from these proto-political gay origins as both political and queer in the 1980s, its usage takes a "detour" into the a-political and straight, of which the seminal "Notes on Camp" is the most well-known result.² The 1960s saw a shift in the perception of camp when gay activists and artists rejected camp and its effeminate gestures, allusions to Hollywood divas, and over-the-top performances of gendered identities, as a sign of internalized self-hatred, reactionary, and ultimately hurtful to the new political demands of the US gay rights movement. At the same time, camp found its way into popular culture and academic discussions about new aesthetics.³ In accordance with the zeitgeist of the 1960s, Sontag described camp as a sensibility which, as Andy Medhurst summarizes, "advocated an arch skepticism towards established cultural canons" (279). She therefore contributed to "an avant-garde assimilation of camp" (Case 189). Problematically, however, in doing so Sontag claimed that camp is necessarily "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (277), a

statement which is coherent with her own observations on camp, yet ignorant of camp's roots in minority culture.

The proliferation of this depoliticized and decontextualized notion of camp results in a theory of “mass camp sensibility,” a term coined by Barbara Klinger to talk about the reception of Douglas Sirk's melodramas from the 1950s, which “entered mainstream culture ready to adore the mediocre, laugh at the overconventionalized, and critique archaic sex roles” (139). Similar observations can be found in Harry Benshoff's summary of 1960s movie culture in “Movies and Camp” or Andy Medhurst's reading of the original *Batman* series (1966–1968). Pop art also features prominently in this discussion for its inversion of artistic value and merit through elevating mass media products to pieces of art, and its subsequent disruption of cultural canons and aesthetic frameworks.⁴ Its most prominent representative, Andy Warhol, literalized this connection in 1965 in one of his less often exhibited pieces, a film titled *Camp*, in which he does however stress camp's gay connotations.⁵ In contrast to Sontag's claims and definitions like “mass camp,” most of the supposedly mainstream and a-political cultural products from this era—like *Camp*—have since been reclaimed as representing a queer cultural canon and have subsequently become stable references in camp productions, such as Warhol and his influence on Lady Gaga's artistic vision or Douglas Sirk as the precursor to Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Nonetheless, camp's widespread discussion in mainstream media together with the supposed disappearance of its originating condition, the closet, has led several scholars to dismiss subsequent uses as camp lite (Galef and Galef) or pop camp (Robertson 129, Meyer 4), and “proper” camp as dead (e.g., Harris; Mistry).

Meanwhile a newly emerging political movement—no longer concerned with “acceptance” and/via “respectability”—and queer theory rediscovered camp as a politically useful strategy for criticizing oppression and uncovering the hypocrisy of American society in the 1980s. As David Bergmann summarizes: “[i]t took AIDS and poststructuralist theory to make camp intellectually and politically respectable again” (9).⁶ This shift influenced camp's understanding in at least three meaningful ways: first, with queer activism's disregard for respectability and assimilation, camp's reliance on cultural waste, deviant gender representations, and connection to flamboyance ceased to be problematic; second, queer theory and its transferal of the theoretical basis from essentialism to performativity allowed for a much larger catalog of politically meaningful

strategies; and finally, the de-essentializing and thus broadening of gay, to LG(BT), to queer meant that beyond the “in-group” of white gay men, many other individuals and groups who saw themselves outside of and in contrast to heteronormativity were acknowledged as able to participate in camp discourses. Moe Meyer bases his definition of camp as a queer strategy, for example, in the following reconceptualizing of queer⁷:

As the rejection of a social identity based upon the differentiation of sexual practices, queer identity must be more correctly aligned with various gender, rather than sexual, identities because it is no longer based, and does not have to be, upon material sexual practice. (3)

Similarly, Annamarie Jagose argues for both the openness of the term itself and the inclusivity of queer critique:

Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms [sex, gender, and desire] which stabilise heterosexuality.

Camp’s thriving on incongruity thus is newly invested with political potential, as it aligns with queer theory’s deconstructive framework. Accordingly, scholarly treatments of camp influenced by queer theory stress its “demystifying” (Cleto, “Gender” 203) and “denaturalizing” (Doty 83; Smelik 140; Devitt 32) qualities with regard to normative ideologies of gender and sexuality. In light of cultural and gender studies influenced by poststructuralist theory, camp can today be formulated as a subversive strategy in popular culture rather than just a taste for all things “good, because [they’re] awful” (Sontag, “Notes” 292) or “the one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man” (Dyer “So Camp” 59). Instead, Fabio Cleto summarizes that “under the aegis of queer theatricality camp has come to refer no longer to the limited field of gay ‘effeminacy,’ but to the whole apparatus of theatricalised performances of gender signs and gender roles” (“Gender” 203). Furthermore, camp has emerged as a method to enact “the refusal of the queer to be symbolically annihilated or to be subordinated to heteronorms” (Padva 222).

2 CAMP'S DOUBLE CODING: DETACHMENT/ATTACHMENT

As traced above and outlined in my introduction, this book argues on the premise that camp—indebted as it is to queer theory as much as it has developed from an argot for minority groups—is both disruptive and creative, and that these two uses are interrelated. It perceives camp as an aesthetic strategy, which relies on parody—often achieved through stylistic exaggeration, excessive theatricality, or other forms of overarticulation—irony, and humor to create incongruities and discrepancies within (popular) texts. Thus, it disrupts normative notions of gender and sexuality, oppressive ideologies more generally, as well as any given pretext's status as "original" or "natural." These effects define camp as detachment. To form camp's whole, however, the formation of alternative spaces of identification and belonging is equally crucial. Hence, any definition of camp needs to acknowledge its ability to advance "communal empowerment" (Denisoff 135) and thus the importance of understanding camp also as a form of intensified attachment.

From an aesthetic perspective, excess as "the engine of critical reflection" (Cleto, "Queering" 5) is fundamental to understanding camp's form and function, insofar as it "provides a freedom from constraint" (Sconce 551). Yet camp is simultaneously marked by excessive style *and* by "affect in excess of their apparent objective value" (Cohan, *Incongruous* 8).⁸ Al LaValley connects the two aspects when he claims that "camp treasures excessive theatricality and outrageousness as an avenue of heightened emotion" (64). Whereas excessive stylization can be considered the strategy's most straightforward element, enhanced emotion is its most neglected aspect. This disregard for its affective dimension leads to—as, for example, the responses to the Eurovision Song Contest have shown—mislabelling any over-the-top object as camp as much as it results in the refusal to call camp by its name due to objects' and performers' supposed sincerity.

This study in contrast understands camp and its critical potential as inseparable from its affective dimension. With this I follow a point made most poignantly by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her distinction between the oftentimes interchangeably used terms camp and kitsch:

Unlike kitsch-attribution [...] camp-recognition doesn't ask, "What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?" Instead, it says *what if*: What if the right audience for this were

exactly *me*? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or some of the people, who created it? And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same "perverse" angle? (Sedgwick 156, emphases in the original)

This hope for and belief in others sharing "the same 'perverse' angle," which camp inspires, is the key to understanding its relationship to community and affect: camp emerges as a way to relate oneself to the "right audience" (join the in-group) through enjoying the camp texts' celebration of a "perverse angle"; and it appeals to the "perverse angle" through intertextual references to texts that are only canonical to the "right audience." Camp is thus dependent on, as much as it is intent on, drawing new demarcation lines between audiences—communities of taste⁹—reflecting its history as a secret code of communication, even in mass-mediated contexts.

2.1 *Irony, Parody, and Discursive Communities*

The idea of community—specifically as discursive community—also informs camp's distancing qualities and hence its detachment aspect. Linda Hutcheon has written extensively on postmodernism and attests transformative power to all postmodern forms of parody despite opposing claims about the dominance of meaningless pastiche in contemporary culture. Hutcheon describes parody as "repetition with a critical difference" (*Parody* 7). For her, the "critical difference" is produced through a use of irony, which adds an evaluative edge and is therefore crucial to differentiating between parody and pastiche as the kind of "blank parody" which Fredric Jameson describes in his discussion of the distinctly unpleasurable conditions of late capitalism (15–16).

To establish irony's critical power and argue against its supposed ambiguity, Hutcheon opens her consideration on the politics of irony with the following guiding question:

Why should anyone want to use this strange mode of discourse where you say something you don't actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually mean but also your attitude toward it? (*Irony* 2)

The answer, for Hutcheon, lies in the interaction between what has objectively been “said” and the “unsaid,” which is the utterance’s implied meaning. Were the ironic meaning simply this “unsaid,” irony would be but a mere play with words. But irony, Hutcheon contests, is more than that, as its “truth” lies in the mutual information of implied and uttered meaning in “a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid” (*Irony* 89). Here irony, and with it camp, develops its defining “evaluative edge” (*ibid.*). Yet, to make an ironic utterance legible as such, there need to be so-called markers that serve to alert the audience to the irony ahead. Successful ironic communication is consequently only possible if producer (or, in the mass communication context of popular culture, product) and audience agree on such markers as exaggeration and theatricality in the case of camp. If they do, they are part of the same “discursive community,” which is “constituted by shared concepts of norms of communication” (*Irony* 99) and is fundamental to camp’s repeated definition as a “relational” phenomenon, such as David Bergman’s contention that the “camp effect requires a fit between performances and perception, between object and audience” (123). Steven Cohan echoes this sentiment and extends it to account for camp’s effect as “the formation of a queer affect [...] because its irony affords a position of engagement, not alienation” (*Incongruous* 18).¹⁰ The interpreter’s engagement is equally important. Hutcheon makes clear in her argument that there “is no guarantee that the interpreter will ‘get’ the irony in the same way as it was intended. In fact, ‘get’ may be an inaccurate and even inappropriate verb: ‘make’ would be much more precise” (*Irony* 11). Yet she stresses that irony is not a reading against the grain. The community-specific meta-ironic markers either are or are not embedded in a text or utterance, and can only be read as intentional code for irony by the interpreter. In addition to illuminating how irony (and therefore camp) works, Hutcheon thus also clarifies how and when ironic communication is doomed to fail, namely, if the communication situation lacks a basic consensus on signs and values. Inside the specific discursive community, however, irony is never vaguely ambiguous, always evaluative, and, as such, crucial to an understanding of postmodern parody as “transformative in its relationship to other texts, [whereas] pastiche is imitative” (*Parody* 38).

Though Hutcheon is not talking about gender in her book on parody, and most accounts of gender parody are not directly referring to Hutcheon, they nonetheless follow a similar rationale, when they attest

political power to parodic performances of gender. This conviction, which is also central to camp's queer formulation, may be best exemplified by Judith Butler, who describes gender parody as "subversive repetition" (*Gender* 146) in which "genders can [...] be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*" (141, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, where Hutcheon insists that irony gains its strength as "an effective strategy of oppositionality" from "intimacy" with dominant discourses (*Irony* 30), Butler equally evokes gender parody's necessary proximity to hegemonic discourses:

to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posing as the foundational illusions of identity. (*Gender* 46)

Among the most influential scholars who have applied Butler's ideas to a camp analysis of popular media is Pamela Robertson, who coined the term "feminist camp" in her book *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Robertson advanced the argument that women can "reclaim camp as a political tool and rearticulate it within the theoretical framework of feminism," since "camp offers a model for critiques of gender and sex roles" (6). The basis for this rearticulation was her model of female masquerade, where the "credibility of images of the feminine can be undermined by a 'double-mimesis' or 'parodic mimicry'" (10).

Even though Robertson herself limited her discussion of this parodic mimicry to straight women and did not go into the possibility of lesbian camp at length, her work still constitutes an important reference point for thinking about female queer viewing practices. Robertson argued that camp functions not only as a distancing device for female spectators, but rather as a way of enhancing the pleasure they can derive from cultural products, which may—like many of Mae West's portrayals of women used as examples in *Guilty Pleasures*—at first glance, and outside a rather specific discursive community, not seem to be liberating and empowering at all. As with the "said" and "unsaid" of irony, camp allows for both the potentially misogynistic, homophobic, or merely normative mainstream entertainment on the one hand and the critical distance to what is depicted on screen/video/radio on the other, to coexist and interact with one another, and to be mutually transformed through its

evaluative edge. It is precisely in this presence of that which is critiqued rather than the representation of a self-contained alternative, that camp's political potency emerges.

2.2 *Politics*

“Political” can have a wide variety of meanings. Delving into this discussion in his study of emotions, Jack Katz concludes that “[c]ollectively victimized peoples develop exquisite senses of humor and rich joking cultures as an alternative to mass depression” (146). This acknowledgment accounts for camp's inversion of insider and outsider by way of recoding “who is in on the joke.” Camp is thus also a consciously exclusionary gesture. Katz's statement further explains camp's trademark inversion of what is treated as humorous and what as serious, as the in-group's values and experiences will unquestionably differ from mainstream notions of this distinction. One example, not directly related but nonetheless applicable to camp, is Butler's conviction that the “loss of the sense of ‘the normal’ [...] can be its own occasion for laughter” (138–39)—particularly to those who can only gain from irreverence towards the normative. Crucial to such laughter is that it thrives on the incongruities (but not ambiguities) between the playful and the sincere—“the refusal of *gravitas*; serious play with constructed superficiality” (Hemmings 164)—without giving up on either. Instead, emotional investment characterizes the relationship between audience and the text's politics or the unsaid—to use Hutcheon's terms—which here is constituted by camp's critical connotations. The affective component features twofold in these considerations: on the one hand, it denotes that camp connoisseurs are immersed in and *attached* to the cultural product in question and their fellow members of the “right audience” (Sedgwick 156); on the other hand, and intrinsically connected to this aspect, (queer) affect also extends to the underlying motives and themes of the given text, which are taken seriously no matter the exaggeration of their aesthetic representation. One, after all, “can't camp about something you don't take seriously” (Isherwood 110). Isherwood's dictum is explicated by Scott Long, whose comments on camp's relation to the absurd and the serious are worth quoting at length:

camp plays with notions of seriousness and absurdity not to deny them but to redefine them [...] Its particular endeavor is to fix the nature of the

absurd: the society that laughs at the wrong things has gone wrong. To perceive the absurd is to realize that two conjoined ideas do not belong together. Behind camp is the expectation that, once the absurd is properly recognized, a sense of the serious will follow. (80)

In the combination of the sincerity of its motivation, the communal foundations of its humor and intertexts, and the demystifying qualities of its parodic irony ultimately lies camp's progressive potential, attested to by Michael Bronski (43), Richard Dyer (60), and Pamela Robertson (143), among others. With reference to Ann Pellegrini, progressive here is not understood as falling somewhere specific on the political spectrum, but rather as "a matter of ethical horizon: what might be" (184). Camp does not present a "utopian beyond" which disregards current issues, but instead presents a "subversive confusion [...] of precisely those constitutive categories"—to borrow from Butler's argument (46)—that structure our daily encounters with gender, sexuality, and the media. Overall, camp in popular culture "may not embody or produce political power, but its rhetorical push opens a space in which others might realize such power" (Harris 126).¹¹

In the context of this book, these rhetorical pushes include a critique of the stereotyping of lesbian characters in Hollywood cinema and its heteronormativity in Chap. 3, questioning the basic assumptions and "rules" of postfeminist TV in Chap. 4, and finally in Chap. 5 the introduction of queer subjectivity into popular music as a critical alternative to the surveillance of female bodies and exploitation of gay images. The different readings offered in these chapters show how seemingly trivial media products like romantic comedies, sitcoms, and music videos can be employed to expose the absurdity of oppressive cultural frameworks and to empower members of the respective discursive communities to laugh *at* "what is wrong" (not the product itself, but the "absurd" which frames or hinders it) and *with* those "who are the right audience." Such a position of detached attachment is made possible by camp's overthrowing of hierarchies of form and content; the seemingly trivial form is privileged so that it produces an altogether new content and thereby a new level of potentially resistive and decisively queer consumption.

2.3 *Queer Prospects*

This brings me back to the term "queer" and how its employment as a defining characteristic of camp—the breaching, questioning, and

redrawing of boundaries—might seem at odds with the structure of this book, whose chapters, after all, differentiate between lesbian, feminist, and queer camp. By way of explanation, I would like to differentiate between camp’s queer politics and interests, and the media realities in which camp is found and against which it needs to position itself. Hence, while all the texts found here strive for “dethroning” a heteronormative framework that creates the aforementioned distinctions, they utter this critique from culturally specific vantage points. The different categories of camp hence are not meant to imply that the texts in question subscribe to essentialist notions of identity, or that feminist or lesbian camp and queer camp function fundamentally differently. Rather, the respective chapters and their different foci acknowledge how straight women, gay men, and lesbians have historically been constructed and treated differently in US (media) culture, and how their employment of camp as a strategy to defeat, or at least reject, essentialism (among other aims) must therefore come from separate cultural and social places.

The separate development of gay male and lesbian media consumption and cultural production, for example, has led to a heated debate about the possibility of lesbian camp, or rather the legitimacy of calling lesbian practices that resemble camp by that name, either due to exclusionary claims to the strategy by gay males, or for fear of making lesbian creations invisible or secondary to gay male culture. “Reserving” the term as well as the strategy of camp for gay males, however, does more to add to their hegemonic position and foregrounding within queer theory than the opening of the debate to include other communities and individuals. Additionally, gay camp’s more public history should not deceive us into assuming that this unique status is based on its “actual” uniqueness—in fact, queer studies’ impetus to address hegemonic statuses and to question their claim to “originality” and “normality,” asks us to uncover precisely the potential of feminist, lesbian, and other neglected contexts for camp uses.

Chapter 3 expands on these matters in its tracing of lesbian camp through theory and popular culture. It first addresses the major protagonists in the debate, and then discusses the changes in lesbian identity in the years leading up to and during the era of New Queer Cinema, to show why gay and lesbian responses did not develop at the same time and take the same forms, and gives a cultural backdrop against which to read the analyzed examples of lesbian film production. Chapter 3 furthermore introduces a shared aspect of all three exemplary readings of

camp texts after 2000. They are positioned in media discourses no longer defined by “the closet” or invisibility, but rather by “over-visibility” as the result of the commodification of gay and feminist images within a neoliberal market logic which assimilates differences into marketable “edginess.” A “subculture’s recognition of failed access to [...] the culture industry,” which Pamela Robertson sees as the original impetus for camp (122), hence in contemporary contexts is not necessarily marked by repression, but rather distortion; commodified images of gayness emptied of queer subjectivity as much as of images of “strong women,” which themselves function as new disciplinary regimes rather than alternatives to earlier repressive stereotypes. Assuming Sedgwick’s “perverse” angle as the basis of shared cultural (and hence communal) values in this new cultural climate accounts for why camp does not need the closet and violent intolerance to sustain its merit. Rather, it can similarly thrive on rejecting the logic of repressive tolerance and, as such, present a way out of a cultural consensus and way in to an alternative web of affective connections.

NOTES

1. On camp’s connection to stigma Gilad Padva comments: “Camp, as a queer creation and manifestation, objects to the stigmatization that marks the unnatural, extraordinary, perverse, sick, inefficient, dangerous, and freakish. [...] camp provides a different perspective that provokes heteronormative gender roles and codes of visibility and behaviour [...]” (216).
2. Naming Sontag in this context is not meant to infer anything about her sexuality, but merely refers to her statements within “Notes on Camp” as well the text’s subsequent use. For a discussion of how Sontag’s closeted life at the time of writing might have inflected on the text, see Ann Pellegrini’s “After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp,” in which she considers diary entries (published in 2006) to better understand Sontag’s “‘peculiar’ relation to homosexuality” (173). Terry Castle similarly reconsiders Sontag’s remarks on homosexuality in light of these revelations in “Some Notes on ‘Notes on Camp.’” For Sontag’s own addendum to her statements, see “The *Salmagundi* Interview,” in which she reconsiders camp’s ability to create distance from gendered stereotypes (339).
3. For a summary of magazine articles and similarly “popular” treatments of the subject see Ken Feil’s “‘Talk About Bad Taste’: Camp, Cult, and the Reception of *What’s New Pussycat?*”

4. For more on camp in pop art, see: Feil (“Ambiguous 31”); Dick Hebdige, who describes Andy Warhol’s art as involving “a committed, surgical examination of masculinity and femininity as masquerade” (112); Joe A. Thomas who claims that its “affinities with the camp sensibility have always provided Pop with a substantial gay audience” (265); and John Adkins Richardson who writes about the connection as a direct response to Susan Sontag’s essay.
5. Gay allusions are mainly presented through camp codes, such as the stepping out of a closet, playing with a Batman-figure and several semi-theatrical performances, which blur the lines between genders as well as those between “acting out a role” and “being oneself.”
6. For a discussion of camp’s use in a narrower sense of the political, namely as part of activism, see Meyer’s edited collection *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* and Deborah B. Gould’s *Moving Politics*.
7. An interesting point in this reevaluation is raised by Doty, who connects camp’s newly discovered progressive usage to queer activism’s inclusion of lesbians: “Influenced by feminist and lesbian comedy over the past twenty years or so, many gays and bisexual men have adopted a more overt sociopolitical edge in their humor. This is perhaps most evident in uses of camp [...] within progressive and radical queer politics (ACT-UP, Queer Nation) since the mid-1980s” (80).
8. Mark Booth suggested a similar definition—though with an emphasis on the person, rather than the object of camp appreciation—prior to Cohan in his study on camp originally published in 1983: “To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits” (69).
9. For a discussion of camp—though limited to gay male contexts—via Pierre Bourdieu “as an acquired disposition [used] to establish and mark differences by processes of distinction,” see Farmer (111–12). Concerning the idea of taste in pop culture as “cultural capital,” Roy Shuker claims that “the insider is able to join the game, provided he or she has the necessary background knowledge—cultural capital—to do so. All this is part of what has been termed the pleasures of the text” (15).
10. See also Feil (“Ambiguous” 38) and Babuscio (21).
11. The full quote, referring to the camp appeal of the TV series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo, 2003–2007) also tackles its supposed capitalist limitations in fostering progress: “One can do queer work—and, I’d argue, effectively so—while working within a capitalist framework. Even progressive political action has to begin by addressing consumers, if only to rouse them, reshape their conceptions about the status quo” (Harris 126). For further discussion of *Queer Eye*’s camp (and its relation to postfeminism), see Cohan’s “Queer Eye for the Straight Guise: Camp, Postfeminism, and the Fab Five’s Makeovers of Masculinity.”

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-64845-3>

Women, Camp, and Popular Culture

Serious Excess

Horn, K.

2017, X, 264 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-64845-3