

Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic

*Advancing New
Perspectives*



EDITED BY BRUCE E. DRUSHEL
AND BRIAN M. PETERS

Media, Culture, and the Arts

Series Editors: Theresa Carilli and Jane Campbell, both Purdue University Northwest
Communication • Gender and Sexuality Studies

"More than fifty years since the publication of Sontag's 'Notes on "Camp,"' this eclectic collection reconsiders the mainstream proliferation of camp's affective differences (and indifferences) within a broad mass cultural politics of queer feeling."

—**Dana Heller**, Old Dominion University

"Camp is not dead! This wonderful new volume explores its persistent effects on contemporary culture, from Dolly Parton to Madonna and from *RuPaul's Drag Race* to *House of 1000 Corpses*. Bruce E. Drushel and Brian M. Peters have assembled a collection of smart, witty, and accessible essays that explore how and why camp remains an important aspect of pop culture criticism even into the twenty-first century."

—**Henry M. Benshoff**, University of Northern Texas

Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives marks fifty years of writing and cultural production on the phenomenon of camp since Susan Sontag's 1964 cornerstone essay "Notes on 'Camp.'" It provides cutting-edge theory and understanding on ways to read and interpret camp through a collection of essays from historical, theoretical, and cultural perspectives. It includes varied subject areas like camp icons, stylistic periods, and important representative texts from television, film, and literature. These essays understand camp as not only a signifier or aesthetic but also a language, mode, and style that goes beyond its initial linguistic and semiotic guise. The contributors, representing a diverse group of established and rising scholars, explore camp as a largely queer genre that includes varying modes of understanding of desire and of the self outside a hegemonic model of heteronormativity.

CONTRIBUTORS

Barbara Jane Brickman, Emily Deering Caffrey, Robert
Kellerman, Lauren Levitt, Hannah Lynn, Hopkins,
Michael V. Perez, Brian M. Peters, Chris P. Miller

BRUCE E. DRUSHEL is associate professor in the Department of Media, Journalism, and Film at Miami University.

BRIAN M. PETERS is tenured in the English Department at Champlain College St. Lambert.



LEXINGTON BOOKS
An imprint of
Rowman & Littlefield
800-462-6420 • www.rowman.com



DRUSHEL AND PETERS

SOMTAG and the GAMP Aesthetics

Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic

Advancing New Perspectives

Edited by Bruce E. Drushel and
Brian M. Peters

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

Copyright © 2017 by Lexington Books

“Notes on ‘Camp’” from AGAINST INTERPRETATION by Susan Sontag. Copyright © 1964, 1966, renewed 1994 by Susan Sontag. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.


All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN: 978-1-4985-3776-6 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-1-4985-3777-3 (electronic)

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

试读结束：需要全本请在线购买：www.ertongbook.com

Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic

Media, Culture, and the Arts

Series Editor: Theresa Carilli and Jane Campbell, both Purdue University Northwest

Media, Culture, and the Arts explores the ways cultural expression takes shape through the media or arts. The series initiates a dialogue about media and artistic representations and how such representations identify the status of a particular culture or community. Supporting the principles of feminism and humanitarianism, the series contributes to a dialogue about media, culture, and the arts.

Titles in the Series

Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives, edited by Bruce E. Drushel and Brian M. Peters

Introduction

Some Notes on "Notes"

Brian M. Peters and Bruce E. Drushel

Can it really be just fifty years since Susan Sontag legitimized the analysis of *camp* in her landmark 1964 essay, "Notes on 'Camp'?" It is difficult to image a time when a text, a performance, or a moment could be described as "campy" and a sizable number not understand the significance of the labeling. But camp has of course been with us for a very long time, for as long as over-the-top theatricality and irony have been used as commentary and spectators were there to grasp its meaning. Broad awareness of that fact owes in great measure to Sontag's writings. It's time we were caught up.

Sontag, of course, invented neither the term nor the concept it describes; for that we are indebted to the French, whose verb *se camper* means "to pose in an exaggerated fashion." As a form of coded language, camp is thought to have originated in the late nineteenth century as a specifically homosexual Masonic gesture used for communicating publicly about one's personal or sexual life without fear of retribution (Bronski 1984, 43; Core 1999, 9). Forced to mask their gay identities while in heteronormative places, queers developed a coded language that gave common words a second meaning only they could recognize (Chauncey 1994, 286). The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces camp's currently understood meaning to 1909, where it appears as "ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, characteristic of, homosexuals."

If, as many have argued, camp is a reaction to both the excesses of consumer culture and to queers' (and particularly gay men's) frustrations with their marginalization by the dominant order, the proliferation of camp in the early and mid-twentieth century should come as no surprise, coinciding as it did with the burgeoning consumer economy following World War I and the increasing visibility of, and backlash against, gay men with the post-World War II growth in the visibility of LGBTQ culture, publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior and the American Male* (1948), and the anti-communist witch hunts of the 1950s that targeted gays as well.

The growth of camp likely was not linear. Design critic Thomas Hine (1986) effectively designated the decade 1954 and 1964 to be the campiest decade in American history in his book *Populuxe*—a term he created that fuses “popular” with “luxury.” He describes the great spending spree fueled by economic boom years in the United States and attributes the proliferation of camp to a period in post-war U.S. history when consumers had an excess of spending ability, wanted to acquire stylish possessions, but also wanted to demonstrate their wealth. Sadly, they often lacked the taste to know on what they should be spending. Ironically, the decade on which Hine focuses is bookended by Christopher Isherwood’s novel *The World in the Evening* (1954), famous for the author’s observation that, “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun *out* of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (214) at its start and Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’” at its end.

This anthology thus marks fifty years of writing and cultural production concerning camp as it questions, problematizes, theorizes, and understands strategies for its reading and interpretation. Our goal was to assemble a solid collection of essays about camp from historical, theoretical, and cultural perspectives. A truly multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary anthology on camp had not been released since the mid-1990s and many changes both culturally and theoretically have altered not only the ways we think about camp, but the nature of camp itself, in the time since.

SONTAG AND SPECTATORSHIP

Sontag is important in understanding a critical discourse on camp because she is responsible for not only initiating the first serious discussions of its cultural impact but also for her attempts at describing (though not defining) the phenomenon. Her understanding of camp (and somewhat problematized position on it) rests on the notion that what some consider to be a lower cultural form at best and a celebration of bad taste at worst can become incredible and certainly worthy of study. Scholarship on camp from the 1990s, including Marcie Frank’s important “The Critic as Performance Artist: Susan Sontag’s Writing and Gay Cultures,” sees this as limiting. Frank believes Sontag reveals an “ambivalence about performance” and by “rejecting the autobiographical mode as exhibitionism, Sontag does not identify the characteristics that allow her to know camp” (Frank 1994, 177). Moreover, recent critical studies of contemporary examples of camp, grounded in matters of identity and performance theory, find in camp fluid examples of queer aesthetics. Sontag’s writing is therefore both seminal and dated, given that it predated the Stonewall

uprising and thus lacks the comparative pre-gay liberation/post-gay liberation perspective of later critics and scholars.

As Scott Long argues, the "spectator" is responsible for the actual creation of camp (Long 1994, 80). Camp frequently is linked to college culture and young adult culture; thus, Long's spectator is now a very different kind of cultural observer, given that camp examples have evolved significantly over the decades. Sontag's general position of an absence of political underpinnings in camp easily could be linked to pre-liberation understandings of the construct. However, as Andrew Ross and other queer theorists have argued, once the late-1960s became a cultural moment and turning point, everything became political. Not going to school, for example, could be understood as opposition to a particular system and thus an act of initial ennui could be read further as a reaction to institutional systems of hegemony. Similarly, camp responds to systems of normalcy, gay and straight, and its aesthetic of excess allows it to be in some ways political without being dreadful, as evidenced in coded queer camp of the 1960s and the "out" gay camp of the 1970s (especially the disco years.) However, what was once understood as awful or tasteless also can be read as reactionary, constructed, and often incredible. Furthermore, Long understands the construction of the "dialectical and not deconstructive" by-product that camp enunciates; reading redefines not only a camp subject but also a camp moment (80). This moment has evolved and the essays in this collection will not only question camp and ways to read camp but also understand camp as a language, a mode, a style, and a production/construction that goes beyond code and thereby far beyond its initial linguistic/semiotic guise.

BROADENING THE LENS AND THE PERSPECTIVE

Much of the work on camp from the 1990s established an understanding of it that moves from working class youth culture, with its foundations in Dick Hebdidge's exploration of subculture, to ways of thinking about camp in response to Sontag. The authors in this collection continue this work with a focus on the currency of gender performance, sexuality, and queer culture. Over the last twenty years, scholars have pushed back the frontiers of the exploration of camp to include multiple typologies and a lexicon that embraces leather camp, lesbian drag king camp, and Chicanos/a Camp, to name but three examples. While Ross argued for the reading of the camp subject as either pop camp or gay camp, our perspective envisions a determined break from Ross's binary to include modes of cultural production that foreground a more fluid definition.

The year 1994 saw a break in queer culture from subculture to minority culture. Two decades later, camp readings have been greatly influenced by the kinds of realities that surface in current media (both tradi-

tional and social) and culture. Twenty years ago Madonna was the queen of camp; conversations about mid-90s contemporary camp included her chameleon-like evolution in appearance, the rise of the supermodel, Courtney Love's addiction issues, and Jennifer Aniston's "Rachel" haircut from *Friends*. Now Miley Cyrus is camp, albeit low camp, as is Justin Bieber (though his underwear modeling elevates him to high camp). Neither celebrity identifies as homosexual (once and still a prerequisite, to some) though their representations of teen/post-teen sexuality can be read queerly. In short, the ability to situate low camp and pop camp within a larger trajectory of camp offers virtually endless interpretive possibilities.

CAMP, SEX, AND QUEERNESS

This anthology acknowledges multiple positions among scholars on the question of the necessity of lesbians and gays to the creation of camp, whether by spectator, producer, or performer, yet it also notes the important historical role of queerness in its motivations and traditions. In his essay on "Strategic Camp," Bergman (1993) drew attention to the primary shift in post-millennial camp, asking the reader to think about "the general problem of homosexual style" (93). The question of "style," raised first by Dick Hebdige, still is current, though what we understood as "homosexual style" is not. Essential to the understanding of post-millennial camp is that it is no longer the province of "the homosexual" but *may* instead be of the "queer": non-normative, countercultural, and at the same time reactionary. Recent representations of camp still contest "social controls and conformity" but without the same "gay agenda" of pre-millennial versions of camp.

The gay/straight binary outlined by Bergman, especially in his reference to the resistance to camp of 1960s *Batman* star Adam West, doesn't seem to be part of current dialogues on the phenomenon. Someone exercising influences over the production of *Batman* certainly understood camp. Less certain is whether Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus, and Justin Bieber share an understanding of its nuances or whether they instead are building upon a history of aesthetics that allows them to challenge more normative performances of identity, perhaps to distinguish themselves from the field as performers and innovators. The tragedies these personages embody further lend to readings that include camp and failed sexuality which are intentional with Gaga and very unintentional with Cyrus and Bieber. The failure of sexuality Bieber embodies, the essential irony of camp, is the highly stylized male subject that fails to be in any way sexy.

From Sontag onward, camp, regardless of the interpretive frame applied to it, has been considered a coded language, perhaps secretive at times and likely loaded at others. That language can be what Sontag

understands as "bad taste" or what Ross ponders as he evaluates varied popular tastes. And, of course, what might be bad taste to one could be a fertile ground for study for another. From the seemingly kitschy and sometimes awful, the essays in this collection offer their readers new ways to think about camp that emphasize departures from the important work done in the 1990s (and before).

Regardless of its conceptualization or reception, camp is a queer genre, meaning one that prefigures contested modes of understanding desire and the self and that lies outside of a hegemonic model of heteronormativity. Camp may be considered a structured semiotic that functions as a release from the trials of the day-to-day, especially if one is examining historical modes employed by Oscar Wilde and the high Victorians. Contrary to Sontag's conception of it as apolitical, camp becomes political because it challenges normative ways of thinking and can question and refute hegemonic systems of construction and interpretation. The camp object/subject is thus open: its signifiers figuratively beg to be read, but the kinds of cultural and theoretical understandings that can be applied will shift dramatically from mode to subject, from subject to object, from reader to audience.

PRESENT CONSIDERATIONS

This perspective on camp also permits the casting of a wide net in terms of the sort of performances our authors could consider. While, as our table of contents indicates, one might choose to think of the chapters falling into such categories as "Camp in Literature," "Camp in Celebrity," "Camp on Television," "Camp and Place," and "Camp and Aesthetics," in reality these designations are admittedly arbitrary given both the uniqueness of focus of each and, for some, their overlap among two or more categories.

Perhaps the most widely known camp performances to appear after publication of "Notes on Camp" were on the ABC-TV series *Batman*, which debuted in January of 1966 and ran for three original seasons. Lauren Levitt's chapter, "Batman and the Aesthetics of Camp," problematizes the insistence of some scholars that camp is an exclusively queer form. Levitt firmly establishes *Batman* as camp but notes efforts by its producers to remove elements that would facilitate queer readings of the episodes. Levitt observes that "reading mainstream texts as inherently straight results in the unintentional erasure of queer viewers. By insisting upon the validity of queer readings, access to our common culture is restored to many from whom it has frequently been denied."

While those who argue for the necessity of queerness in the roots of camp allow for both gay male and lesbian production influences and reception positions in its creation, most of the examples examined in their

studies seem to emphasize the “G” in “LGBT.” In “Voyage to Camp Lesbos: Pulp Fiction and the Shameful Lesbian ‘Sicko,’” Barbara Brickman argues for lesbian-themed pulp paperbacks of the 1950s, frequently dismissed for their negative representations of lesbian relationships but embraced by many for their historical and cultural significance, as a uniquely lesbian camp form. Brickman focuses her examination on author Marijane Meaker, whose work “represents the possibility of a different version of lesbian subjectivity in the era—one that finds humorous pleasure in disturbing the vilest homophobic beliefs without entirely separating from them.”

Likewise, Emily Deering Crosby and Hannah Lynn avowedly reject what they consider the specious ownership of camp by white gay men and argue for its recognition as a more inclusive performative strategy for self-representation. They note that Dolly Parton, who is widely acknowledged as a camp icon for her excessive performances of traditional markers of femininity, nevertheless has strategically managed elements of those performances and, in doing so, has created an appeal that transcended boundaries between conservative Christian and LGBTQ communities and that contests the use of so-called “female grotesques” by conventional media as cautionary tales aimed at the moral standing of middle-class white women.

For his essay, “Diva Worship as a Queer Poetics of Waste in D. Gilson’s *Brit Lit*,” Chris Philpot disinters a little-known bit of historical *minutiae*—that Sontag originally planned to title her essay “Notes on Death”—and offers a detailed examination of the relationship of camp to both death and futurity. Not only is camp not dead, as some have argued, but it is integral to a strategy queers have enacted to assure their own futurity in a culture that celebrates biological reproduction as the primary means of its achievement. The camp that infuses diva worship by gay men and its over-the-top wastefulness, he argues, is a highly visible example.

Carl Schottmiller and Tom Piontek would agree with Philpot’s position on camp’s continued viability. As Schottmiller says of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, “Camp has not ‘died’; on the contrary, Camp is constantly in flux as different generations of queer social groups utilize the practice for their own means.” He believes camp to be a form of queer social memory and illustrates the claim with the case of Stephanie Yellowhair, a transgender woman of color treated disrespectfully by a police officer during her arrest on an episode of the FOX television series *Cops*. Yellowhair’s witty reply, “Excuse my beauty,” Schottmiller argues, functions as a form of resistance to oppression in its original usage; when it turns up in *Drag Race* on multiple occasions, it is stripped of its political meaning and thus is reduced to a joke that renders her invisible.

Another example of camp being very much alive is provided by Tom Piontek in his essay, “Prison Camp: Aesthetic Style as Social Practice in *Orange Is the New Black*.” As Piontek notes, camp has been interpreted as

a strategy available to marginalized groups in reaction to attempts at their subjugation. In the case of the denizens of the women's prison that is the setting for the wildly popular television series, camp is a highly politicized and subversive strategy by which they reinvent and represent themselves in a quest for the social visibility denied them by the dominant order.

The importance of self-definition also figures in Robert Kellerman's exploration of the use of camp in the novels of Joe Keenan, an author by whose own account, "write[s] comic novels in which the central characters are two gay men and one straight woman and the supporting cast is evenly divided between gay and straight. The gay characters' sexuality is never an issue, it's just a given" (1997, 324), but who actually foregrounds sexuality as a central issue in his novels, since their storylines inevitably revolve around the characters' skillful navigation of self-disclosure (other than to the audience).

Place figures to a perhaps surprising extent in two of the collections' explorations of camp, both of which are set in Texas, whose reputation for outsizing and exaggeration are known the world over. Olivia Oliver-Hopkins uses director Rob Zombie's horror classic *House of 1000 Corpses* and its rural east Texas setting to examine camp and class, which she subdivides into socioeconomic class and action-based class. Oliver-Hopkins concludes that the film ultimately challenges the white trash stereotype through its camp representation of the impoverished family who perpetrates horrifying acts on the unsuspecting couples on their backwoods roadtrip.

Elizabeth Melton finds a wholly different representation of camp in Texas culture as captured in the *Greater Tuna* theatrical quadrilogy. She argues for the plays as both camp and queer, making the point that "*Greater Tuna* challenges the conventional understandings of queerness by placing moments of traditional campy queerness alongside the queerly normal." As an example, she observes that *Greater Tuna* camps rurality through language, queering time in the process, because its iconic countrified speech mannerisms make the expression of ideas a prolonged affair and because, though audiences appear to be witnessing a progressing narrative, nothing is expected to change.

Camp images and moments can provide insight into cultural norms and priorities from distinctive periods in time, as Brian Peters notes in his analysis of popular icons from the 1980s, including the singer Madonna and the models Linda Evangelista and Christy Turlington. Madonna's hairstyles and clothing have undergone seismic shifts throughout her lengthy career, frequently influencing popular styles that were equally fluid. Both she and Malcolm McLaren borrowed extensively from Harlem drag ball culture in their work but, using Jenny Livingston's documentary *Paris is Burning* as a point of reference, Peters points out that only McLaren properly credited his source material.

Michael Perez uses "The Southern Grotesque" of author Flannery O'Connor as a lens through which to analyze a particular camp art form, American drag, from its well-documented early days in the drag balls of New York in the 1920s, through its mainstream emergence on film in *Some Like it Hot* and on television's *Texaco Star Theatre*, through the film documentaries *The Queen* and *Paris is Burning*. In addressing his method, Perez contends, "that disgust not only breeds contempt, but a better method of assessment for the state of an art form in danger of gentrification to a binary of realness versus everything else."

The texts at the center of Bruce Drushel's analysis of "Vicious Camp" are, he argues, an example of multilayered camp. The camp humor in the ITV/PBS situation comedy *Vicious* revolves around an older gay couple played to theatrical excess by respected actors Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Derek Jacobi. At the same time, the series itself camps on the formulaic situation comedies of the United States and United Kingdom of the 1970s, including overly familiar plot lines (e.g., tragically unhip characters try to be hip at a dance club), supporting characters who remain unidimensional despite being in every episode (e.g., the cheapskate, the libertine, the woman with dementia,) and overused devices (e.g., reintroducing the same two characters each episode, the phone call from mother, the super-annuated pet).

Finally, Tim Cusack turns a camp lens on Susan Sontag herself or, rather, the carefully and collaboratively crafted persona of Susan Sontag that was both routinely performed and expected by the public. In Cusack's view, that persona masked a young woman (she was 31 when "Notes on 'Camp'" first was published) who feared the prospect of ridicule from the intellectual community she sought to impress and her outing as a closeted lesbian. He relies upon a series of anecdotes involving Sontag at an arts festival in the late-1980s, the location of the home(s) she made with photographer Annie Liebowitz, and her fraught relationship with Camille Paglia, her later-life intellectual rival and the author of the critical essay "Sontag, Bloody Sontag."

REFERENCES

- Bergman, David. 1993. "Strategic Camp: The Art of Gay Rhetoric." In *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman, 92-109. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Bronski, Michael. 1984. *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*. Boston: South End Press.
- Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books.
- Core, Philip. 1984. *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth*. New York: Delilah Books.
- Frank, Marcie. 1994. "The Critic as Performing Artist: Susan Sontag's Writing and Gay Cultures." In *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman, 173-84. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.

- Hine, Thomas. 1986. *Populuxe*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Isherwood, Christopher. 1954. *The World in the Evening*. London: Methuen.
- Keenan, Joe. 1997. "The Perils of Promotion." In *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*, edited by Martin Duberman, 322–25. New York: New York University Press (Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies).
- Kinsey, Alfred; Pomeroy, Wardell B.; Martin, Clyde E. 1948. *Sexual Behavior and the American Male*. Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders Company.
- Long, Scott. 1994. "The Loneliness of Camp." In *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman, 78–91. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Ross, Andrew. 1994. "Uses of Camp." In *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, edited by David Bergman, 54–77. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

