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# On the Death of Camp

By Mayne

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1. *Camp is esoteric— something of a private code [...] To talk about camp therefore is to betray it.* –Susan Sontag.<sup>1</sup>
2. The unrestrained, bombastic opulence of the Met Gala has turned the hoi-polloi into a teeming rabble of amateur fashion critics decrying the ‘Death of Camp.’ Though when asked, no one, least of all those on the red carpet, could tell you what Camp is without pointing to the outfit they were wearing that evening.
3. The downfall of Camp style is not its ambiguity; it has undoubtedly persisted amor phously over decades. This is a rare feat for an aesthetic [Example A: Disco].
4. Camp resists definition because it is not an entity, an object, or a proper noun. Camp can exist only in a dialectic between the rich, the powerful, and the beautiful—and the marginalized oppressed.
5. *In a classical philosophical opposition, we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically etc.), or has the upper hand.* –Jacques Derrida.<sup>2</sup>
6. Camp arose as a way for a hidden undercaste in American society to aesthetically flout their subjugation as an act of protest. By willfully exhibiting a visual style that society deemed to be a marker of the “gauche,” or simply *bad taste*, the creators of Camp were able to exercise a sense of ownership over their marginalized bodies in the public sphere.
7. Camp is considered to be *bad taste*, but not all *bad taste* is Camp.
8. *Bad taste* cannot exist in a vacuum, rather it is a perversion of good taste. Taste is only considered *bad* when it is witnessed or recorded, and thereby incurs social opprobrium.
9. Designations of *bad taste* thus must be imposed by those with *good taste* onto other members of their outgroup who differ in ways the *good taste* group deems to be significant. By designating someone of *bad taste*, the elite and powerful exclude others from their echelons even if those in question have all the other implicit requirements to be a member of this in-group (possible “requirements” include: white skin, mainstream religious affiliations, significant amassed affluence, et al.).
10. *Bad taste* has a particularly acute impact on social relations in the United States. This is likely due to the fact that American society purports to be egalitarian and thus lacks institutionally-codified social distinctions, such as title structures or castes, that were used to distinguish between peoples in many other nations. The elite needed to get creative to maintain their power, and thus, taste.
11. Camp exists as a mechanism of power for the invisible American lower classes to eradicate the stigma associated with taste.
12. This utilization of the arts—fashion, literature, fine and visual arts—as a means for the oppressed to reclaim social standing from the oppressive majority is a recurrent leitmotif in American history. See: the universal perverse fascination at the disgust of Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce or Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). See: the popularity of rap music during Reagan’s ‘War on Drugs’ and ‘Tough on Crime’ initiatives.

13. *[Camp means] you have to be able to see the absurdity of life from outside of yourself. [...] Then you can laugh at the absurdity.* –RuPaul.
  14. So what say this of Camp at the Met Gala? In a plain-vanilla Marxian sense, the co-opting of the Camp style by the most visceral extreme of the monied and be-famed was akin to the bourgeois alienation of the product from the proletariat. Camp was created & popularized by the Black and queer subcultures, yet they were not the ones getting recognition for the Camp style [both on the Gala runway and in the Met exhibition], rather it was wealthy white men and women.
  15. While Black and queer people were present in the hallowed halls of the Met on this first Monday in May of 2019, having representatives is not sufficient to claim diversification. This is tokenism.
  16. In more modern vernacular, the theme of Camp is a form of cultural appropriation. It is an exploitation of those who created their culture (i.e. the worker) by co-opting their style (i.e. the “product” of Camp) without due recognition.
  17. When Camp enters into the mainstream in such a fashion, as in the Met Gala, it dislocates the aesthetic style from the power it wields. Those marginalized, who championed Camp, can no longer use its bombastic self-parody, or its ‘view from the outside’ (of social stigma), as a means of restoring their autonomy in society.
  18. After the Met, Camp was irreparably altered. Camp, once a manifestation of power and protest, is now merely decorative accoutrements.
  19. It seems fitting that exploitation would be a theme in fashion, an industry that thrives off the abusive utilization of Black and brown bodies in non-Western countries to create the pieces they sell for hundreds or thousands times more than one of their worker’s hourly wage [the minimum wage in Myanmar, to name one, is \$3.60/hour].<sup>5</sup> The fashion industry could not help but let the moral tar of their oppression seep out from under the carefully crafted coats of invisibility they place over their supply chain and into the very aesthetics of the garments that they put on the runway.
  20. Beauty is pain, but only if the pain is outsourced.
  21. Simply showcasing Camp in the *space* of the Met is enough to wrest the power of Camp as a means to undermine oppression away from those who are oppressed.
  22. *I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.* –Glenn Ligon.<sup>4</sup>
  23. To place Camp in a museum, especially one that garners a religious respect in the Western world, is to render it dead. Camp, in this regard, is not an anomalous outlier: any object that enters a museum is dead.
  24. The art object hanging in a museum is enshrined as ‘significant,’ yet simultaneously also as ‘history.’ Entering a museum makes an entity ‘classic,’ yet this is also at the expense of ‘cool.’
  25. ‘Cool,’ and all of the term’s variants [rad, groovy, hip, funky] are vacuous. Cool means nothing and is instead populated by what is à la mode.
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26. What can be defined, however, is the antithesis of cool. The antithesis of cool is what we call today ‘the mainstream.’ Cool requires novelty, implicit political critique, and reactions of disgust from those who do not understand. (Though these criteria are necessary and insufficient burdens.)
27. Social progress occurs from the universal overcoming of disgust. ‘Contemporary’ and ‘successful’ Art is the vanguard that introduces palatable disgust to the populace in order to prime systemic change.
28. By placing it within the context of the Met, Camp has been canonized. It is classic, rather than cool. Camp as politics, Camp as power, Camp as disgust, is dead.
29. The enemy of the subculture is erasure without political recognition.
30. The enemy of the subculture is culture.
31. The Met Gala is thus a send-off to a bygone trend. It has rigorous code of dress [wearing all black] that separates in-group [those who mourn the loss] from out-group [those who witness]. Only a select few [mourners], who are deemed to have ‘really known’ fashion, are invited. In these ways, the Met Gala is indistinguishable from a funeral.
32. The dress code for the Gala is never merely to dress according to theme. One is not expected to simply dress ‘Camp’ in its literal sense, but rather one must take the theme and exaggerate it to its extreme. Attendees were instructed to ‘Campify’ [parody through excess] Camp itself.
33. This was the Gala’s greatest success: the camping of Camp both aesthetically and politically.
34. The theme of Camp at the Met Gala has been controversial and scrutinized—not because the clothing worn was not Camp, but rather because it *was* an expression of Camp, in all its ecstasy. The Met Gala wrested Camp as a tool of revolution from the hands of oppressed and used the style to bolster their own superior status. And it all happened in such a public fashion.
35. The Met Gala was an unintentional exposure, a peeling back of the curtain to reveal the gears within. One goes to the Met to learn something of fashion, and we have. Only it was not the intoxicating appreciation of craft and opulence that they wanted to peddle. Instead, it was something closer to the Truth behind the artifice, the thread of exploitation that binds the fabric we drape across our backs day-after-day—we have Camp to thank for that.

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1 Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1961) 275.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 41.

3 The Late Show with Steven Colbert, “RuPaul Charles: Who was ‘Pure Camp’ at the Met Gala?,” video, 2:04.

4 Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND)*, 1990, Whitney Museum of Art.

5 Nyan Ling Aung, “Government Makes it Official, Basic Wage is K4800,” Myanmar Times, May 15 2018.