

Redefining Kitsch and Camp
in Literature and Culture

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Edited by

Justyna Stępień

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

JUSTYNA STEPIEŃ

Since the advent of postmodern culture, the aesthetics of kitsch and camp have become intriguing sites for analysis in comprehending the cultural landscape of contemporary times. Exposed to the mediated world, the terms have been undergoing constant redefinition, becoming elusive and often confusing in the context of dynamic cultural processes. Initially rejected and reviled by the purveyors of high culture, who saw them as the antithesis of fine art and an embarrassment to modern culture, due to the acceleration of mass culture trends, the traditionally “lowbrow” aesthetics of kitsch and camp are no longer uniformly vilified. Conversely, the lack of a clear differentiation between high and low culture has enhanced their appeal, whilst simultaneously lauding them as potent and viable sources of artistic inspiration. Having become generators of popular visualization, kitsch and camp transformed the cultural landscape, enriching visual and linguistic spheres with what was formerly only acclaimed as marginal and tasteless.

One thing that must be asserted is that contemporary culture does not exist without the consumption of kitsch and camp aesthetics. This is a mutually interdependent and performative relation. As Tomáš Kulka asserts, “kitsch has become an integral part of our modern culture, and it is flourishing now more than ever before. You find it everywhere. It welcomes you to the restaurant, greets you in the bank, and smiles at you from advertising billboards” (16). Therefore, having taken over the everyday landscape, the concept of kitsch cannot be limited to one category or example.

Also camp sensibility, processual in its very nature, transgresses and reinvents culturally normative codes, and their “binaries such as art/kitsch, natural/artifice, serious/frivolous to reveal the dominant to be arbitrary” (Holliday, Potts 163). In this manner, while feeding itself on kitsch taste, camp maintains its performativity, becoming a cultural product in “quotation marks,” which is far from being serious (Sontag 280).

This book addresses the ways kitsch and camp evolved as historically theorized concepts. Given the wide variety of forms assumed by both

aesthetics, the current project illuminates the value of critical attitudes towards the terms, so that they may become a springboard for further discussions on literature and culture within a consumer context. The collected papers trace both popular culture and avant-garde productions to emphasize the complexities of kitsch and camp aesthetics, especially with regard to socio-cultural transitions.

The aesthetics of kitsch and camp, as this collection of papers endeavours to demonstrate, manifests itself in a myriad of discursive spaces and modes. Intuitively anticipated in literature and culture, the performative character of the two aesthetics has been discussed by the authors of this collection from a number of theoretical perspectives, including gender studies, queer studies, popular culture studies, aesthetics, film studies and postcolonial studies, tracing its background within postmodern theoretical approaches. This dynamic embrace of kitsch and camp indicates that cultural life has the potential to constantly redefine their forms, texts and visual messages. In addition, when discussed against the backdrop of major cultural shifts, all the texts present a global perspective, encompassing the works of American, British, Italian and Polish artists.

Chapter 1 focuses on the theoretical approaches towards transformations of the poetics of camp and kitsch in the face of the postmodern shift. Anna Malinowska asserts that the majority of cultural interpretations have mistakenly synonymised popular culture's eclecticism with the concept of camp poetics. To illustrate her points, the author contrasts Adam Shankman's remake of *Hairspray* with John Waters's original production to show how they negotiate their specific modes of aestheticization. Her analysis proves that camp's performative acts use popular culture to subvert the normative nature of Waters's original film. Thus, the aesthetics of camp operates always on the margins. In a similar manner, C.E. Emmer's article addresses the ongoing debates over how to classify and understand kitsch, from the inception of postmodern culture onwards. It is suggested that the lack of clear distinction between fine art and popular culture generates "approaches to kitsch – what we might call "deflationary" approaches – that conspire to create the impression that, ultimately, either "kitsch" should be abandoned as a concept altogether, or we should simply abandon ourselves to enjoying kitschy objects as kitsch" (25). The author offers critical insight into "kitschy" items made in response to 9/11 and tries to examine the reception of these products through scrutinizing a selection of remarks posted by the Internet commentators.

Chapter 2 analyses the potential of camp and kitsch aesthetics in horror productions. Tomasz Fisiak opens this part with a look at hagsploitation movies, a genre popular in the 1960s in the USA and the UK, that

embraced the aesthetics of kitsch/camp, “blending elements of Hollywood glamour with the most kitschy prerequisites of the traditions of sentimentalism and Gothicism” (41). In his discussion of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *What’s the Matter with Helen?*, the author identifies hag heroines that became paragons of camp sensibility, transgressing the oppressiveness of patriarchal order. Subsequently, Ewa Partyka introduces readers to the pleasures of Mario Bava’s horror aesthetics that seem to derive from the French “Theatre of Horror.” While investigating the iconography of bad taste in the movies, the author focuses on these interrelationships between horror film strategies that are based on a kitsch and camp sensibility that is then used to entertain mass audiences.

Chapter 3 touches upon the literary games within kitsch and camp poetics that subvert the formal qualities of writing, dissolving the boundaries between high and low discourse. Paweł Marcinkiewicz investigates rhetorical devices that introduce kitsch in the poetry of John Ashbery, Glyn Maxwell and W.S. Merwin. Employing aesthetic, philosophical and linguistic theories to corroborate his claims, the author asserts that kitsch sensibility produces a semantic aporia that transgresses the limits of language and experience in poetry. In the second part of the Chapter devoted to Mina Loy’s poetry, Grzegorz Czemieli categorizes her oeuvre as *literature mineure*, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in the context of the deterritorialization of language. As the author’s analysis reveals, the marginal position of the poet – and camp sensibility – redefines the achievements of avant-garde and modernist aesthetics. Finally, Monika Kocot’s article gives insight into Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* and Thomas King’s *Green Grass Running Water* both of which employ trickster narratives to trigger a heteroglossia of aesthetic experience. These two texts are examined from the theoretical perspectives proposed by Abraham Moles, Jean Baudrillard and Mikhail Bakhtin, ultimately showing kitsch, from its carnivalesque aspects, as an an experience of socio-aesthetic transgression.

Chapter 4 discusses to what extent kitsch and camp aesthetics in film oscillate between popular culture and high art discourses. Applying Theodor Adorno’s concept of the culture industry and mechanisms of kitsch to an analysis of Brian De Palma’s *Phantom of the Paradise*, Dorota Babilas debates whether art and kitsch are “polar opposites or parts of a continuum of human creativity” (120). Agata Łuksza, on the other hand, analyzes the aesthetic image of Marilyn Monroe from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, considering the essential artificiality of kitsch and camp when compared with the natural charm of glamour.

Chapter 5 investigates the poetics of camp in relation to identity and gender issues as represented in certain film and television productions. In her discussion of *Breakfast on Pluto* and *The Birdcage*, Aleksandra Lubczyńska employs the theories of Susan Sontag and Judith Butler to analyze how campy discourse conveys aspects of identity. While analyzing the films, the author concludes that camp is endowed with political power and that gender performativity stems directly from camp sensibility. Finally, *Angels in America* completes the discussion by examining camp aesthetics in the construction of homosexual discourse. Looking at the main characters of the series, Justyna Bucknall-Holyńska shows the complexities and scope of human sexualities and gender identifications.

Chapter 6 looks at the ways camp sensibility is being translated into different cultural groups to evoke the marginality of language and image. Weronika Maćków examines Maxine Hong Kingston's novels that revel in the pomposity and exaggeration of their performance. Theatrical at its core, campy poetics enables the crossing of gender and racial boundaries within Kingston's novels. Marta Crickmar, on the other hand, in her article devoted to the English translation of Michał Witkowski's *Lovetown* considers how to translate camp discourse in order not to impoverish its marginal and culture specific character. She arrives at the conclusion that the English translation has been "camped" to better fit the British and American idea of a gay novel. Finally, Georgina Gregory moves the discussion of camp aesthetics towards the analysis of the stage image of tribute bands. The author concentrates on the gender transformations of Mandonna and AC/DShe, proving that each group's version of camp either challenges or affirms the discourses surrounding male and female identity, musicianship and performance.

In conclusion, the selected material offers a variety of interpretations of representational practices in popular culture and literature. Examining and interrogating the various critical and cultural contexts of kitsch and/or camp, these works offer a variety of heated arguments about contemporary theoretical approaches to both, seeking to reevaluate these critical perspectives. Consequently, the volume provides a commentary, much needed within modern academia, on the mechanisms and functions of kitsch and camp in contemporary literary and cultural studies, reflecting on at least some of the transformations that are currently underway.

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CHAPTER ONE:
**THE EVOLUTION OF KITSCH AND CAMP
IN POPULAR CULTURE**

BAD ROMANCE: POP AND CAMP IN LIGHT OF EVOLUTIONARY CONFUSION

ANNA MALINOWSKA

Evolution is seen as a mark of something positive. It denotes a movement forward, which we associate with a sense of progress, expected to herald benevolent consequences. Benevolent or not, evolution always means change, and change means a shift, and such a shift leads to confusion, since, affecting one thing, it affects all the phenomena existing within a system and destabilizes their fixed constellation. What is, thus, most interesting about evolution is not *the change*, but rather the *confusion*. It exposes a fissure and creates a space – usually overlooked to the advantage of progress – that enables *the change* to be understood, and becomes crucial in the process of naming the nature of the alteration and its effects.

The majority of confusion in the *cultural system* today is related to the rapid development of *popular culture*. Many changes, consequent to its evolution, have determined various art-ridden or entertainment-oriented forms of expression. *Popular culture*, understood as a field of cultural production, which for a long time has contributed to the generation of a prevailing and dominant aesthetics, has become the most significant influence upon phenomena developing within today's *cultural system*. Broad, and eluding clear definition, *the popular* expands together with the development of its practice. Consequently, it produces new meanings and triggers new theoretical approaches to both itself, and phenomena associated with its role and manifestation in culture.

The dynamics in describing popular culture which, as Raymond F. Betts puts it, are “almost without definition” (1), have been of substantial influence on the new understanding of camp. Camp's attractiveness for cultural criticism, visibly enhanced for the last two decades, has been reflected in numerous recent interpretations that established or re-established it as a feminist manifesto (Pamela Robertson), a cultural economy (Matthew Tincom), a literary genre (Gary McMahan) or a

political aesthetics (Moe Meyer). While the gender, economic, literary and political hermeneutics have aimed at clarifying the idea and cultural role of camp, interpretations proposed by the theory of pop have produced lots of inconsistencies. Claiming the rebirth of camp in popular media (as a style adopted by pop icons and many pop-cultural productions), the theory of pop distorts the actual functions and meanings of camp stylization. Describing camp as “pervasive in contemporary popular media” (Shugart, Waggoner 1), cultural interpretations that study pop in the context of camp mistakenly synonymize the two aesthetics and present them as cooperative and complementary, forgetting that what seems a perfect marriage might make a bad romance.

The seeming cohabitation of pop and camp should not be regarded as a sign of affection. A relationship, so tense and full of frictions as theirs, defines itself by rules of difference (if not *différance*). Seen as mutually dependent, pop and camp are forms, styles and phenomena that arose from contrasting and often mutually exclusive histories and tendencies. Although strongly permeating each other and not indifferent to one another’s development, pop and camp are trends dissimilar in quality and function. Differences between pop and camp, even if not always clear, are fundamental, and mostly visible in the ways the two aesthetics construct their narratives and produce meanings, which in pop are progressive but stabilizing, and in camp, transgressive and very unstable.

Despite this divergence, more and more products of popular culture have been identified as camp. Camp sensibility has been increasingly recognized in the products of popular industry. This might result from the dynamic expansion of pop and its growing domination over other artistic forms and aesthetics. It could also be an effect of an attempt to intensify the interdependency between control and availability, or as John Fiske puts it, “between forces of closure (or dominance) and openness (or popularity)” (5), crucial to the maintenance and development of *the popular*. Pop’s eclecticism, manifesting itself in the appropriation of other styles and strategies, endangers the identity of individual forms. Frequent adaptations of camp in popular entertainment raise confusion around *the campy* and *the popular*, which leads to a false recognition of pop as camp or camp as pop, and distorts their cultural signification(s).

Pop-camp and *the popular*

Initially, camp was a practice. “Originally,” as George Melly describes it in his *Revolt into Style*, “‘camp’ was a purely homosexual term” that “meant overtly and outrageously queer, ” and “implied transvestite

clothing” (177). This understanding changed with the postmodern experiment of giving low forms of art and entertainment the status of *the culturally highbrow*. In what we might call a postmodern *process*, camp – “the language of marginalized misfits” (McMahon 5) – became a “variant of sophistication” (Sontag) and, as Isherwood had earlier described it, “something much more fundamental” (114). This fundamentality of camp was strongly emphasized in “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay, which traced Isherwood’s idea of the two-dimensional character of camping. It explored Isherwood’s distinctions of *low camp* – associated with cross-dressing practices and drag performances – and *high camp* – part of a cultural heritage with “the whole emotional basis of the Ballet, for example, and of course of Baroque art” (Isherwood 115) – and listed camp’s formal characteristics that forever determined its cultural status.

Camp’s (re)emergence on the cultural scene in the 1960s automatically associated it with the Pop revolution. “Camp, in the form in which it came to be received and practiced [. . .], symbolized an important break with the style and legitimacy of the old liberal intellectual” (Ross 318). Consequently, what functioned as a homosexual practice was turned into a unisex aesthetic and strategy, that, once marginal, became increasingly mainstream. Camp’s tastes – theatrical, flamboyant, tacky and deeply ironic – linked it to Pop Art which, although very different, “embodie[d] an attitude that is related” (Sontag). This synonymy developed together with the growing universality of the word *pop* itself. As Melly observes:

The expression ‘pop art’ or ‘pop’ implying ‘derived from pop art’ became increasingly slapped on to all kinds of things. There were pop colours, for example, unusually clear primaries or what would have been thought of as unfortunate and vulgar juxtaposition. Pop fashions also, the meaning here signifying anything either shiny or transparent and inevitably made from synthetic material without any attempt to conceal the fact. The word ‘pop’ was interchangeable with the word ‘camp’ in relation to an irreverent revival of certain humble or popular objects from the past. (147)

Pop used camp rather incomprehensibly, with blissful ignorance to its tradition. “When [. . .] pop turned to camp, it redefined the word for its own needs. Pop used camp neither in the high nor low sense” (Melly 177). By the 1980s, the false equivalency that had arisen between the two words led to the emergence of a cross term, *pop-camp*. Although contradictory, the concept spread, mainly due to, as Fabio Cleto argues, “the possibility that camp offered to muddle up categories and to mix audiences, in the exhilaration brought forth by the simultaneous challenge to the settled hierarchies of taste *and* sexuality” (303). This further deepened the confusion between the styles, proving a strong influence on the understanding of *the*

popular that denoted popular culture in its modern sense. Defined by Raymond Williams as “‘widely-favoured’ and ‘widely-liked’” (236- 37), *the popular*, as captured in the term *pop-camp*, was losing its correspondence with common aesthetic preferences. It was also losing its applicability as a reliable tool for the preferences of measurement and assessment. *The queer* in camp distorted *the straight* in popular. The queerness was also inadequate, as Ross argues, for representing the ideas of *popular culture*, as well as those associated with Pop Art. “Pop-camp [. . .] is a contradiction in terms, because camp is the ‘in’ taste of a minority elite [. . .] Pop, on the other hand, was supposed to declare that everyday cultural currency had value, and that everything had more or less equal value” (Ross 318).

Camp’s “cultural elitism” is a feature that separates it from *the popular*. The elitism, however, does not stand for sophistication in the high sense. It rather denotes a certain marginality when signifying camp’s forms of manifestation, and emphasizes camp’s *non-mainstream* character. It also suggests that from the perspective of contemporary meanings of popular culture (understood as a form of *taste formation* and an area where *the aesthetic norm* is reflected, constructed and consumed), camp’s position within *the popular* still determines itself in terms of non-normativity.

This does not mean that links between pop and camp are nonexistent. There would not be any confusion if these two aesthetics were not related. They are, however, too often mistaken for each other and what makes them so easy to mistake are the aesthetic strategies they choose to construct their “performances,” and the solutions they aim to devise in an attempt at building their social and cultural significance. As Fiske describes:

Popular culture is full of puns whose meanings multiply and escape norms of the social order and overflow their discipline; its excess offers opportunities for parody, subversion, or inversion; it is obvious and superficial, refusing to produce the deep, complexly crafted texts that narrow down their audiences and social meanings; it is tasteless and vulgar, for taste is social control. (5)

But unlike camp, popular culture fails to generate its own significance. It is incapable of producing durable meanings, or in other words, the meanings it produces are too temporary to gain, or establish, any lasting significance:

Popular texts are inadequate in themselves – they are never self-sufficient structures of meanings [. . .], they provoke meanings and pleasure, they are

completed only when taken up by people and inserted into their everyday culture. The people make popular culture at the interface between everyday life and the consumption of the products of the cultural industry. Popular culture is the culture of the subordinate [. . .]; it is not concerned with finding consensual meanings or with producing social rituals that harmonize social difference [. . .]. (Fiske 6-7)

Camp's *texts* are also provocations but the meanings and pleasure they tend to produce are guilty, insubordinate and inharmonious. Camp, although accessible on the surface, is, in terms of *the popular order*, something strongly destabilizing. Camp endangers the functioning of the popular. Although it found its way in to the popular scene and has functioned there ever since Mae West's early movies, it represents cultural qualities different from those known to, and acceptable for, *the popular*.

The *on* and *off* of culture: mainstream vs. marginal

Camp, in its relation to culture has been usually described in terms of the *homo-hetero* dichotomy. Valid to a large extent, this mode of description is, however, slightly limiting. A broader category, which helps to establish camp's actual position in culture, is the dichotomy *off* and *on*. Unlike the gender-oriented distinction, the location one, as we may call it, offers an extended perspective for the examination of camp and a better view on the cultural context itself.

The categories of cultural *offness* and *onness* seem particularly interesting in light of the invalidation of the once recognized division of highbrow and lowbrow of culture. Today, even if occasionally referred to, this way of qualitative assessment is most often used in a historical context. The opposition of *high* and *low*, so strongly emphasized since the nineteenth century, has served as a distinction between high art and popular culture, serving to hierarchize modern aesthetics, especially according to their function and organization. Quality has not been the only marker of distinction; what also counts is the mode of production that has determined the value of cultural products. As John Storey observes in *Inventing Popular Culture*, "[t]he distinction between high and popular [. . .] is dependent on an organizational distinction between nonprofit cultural institutions run by private individuals or boards of trustees and the commercial, profit-seeking, culture industries" (Storey 33).

Contemporary popular culture is more profit-ridden than ever before. The term *popular* today denotes commercial efficiency:

What most obviously sets contemporary popular culture apart from anything preceding it is the mass-produced means of pleasure and entertainment that are now being enjoyed by multitudes never reached before. Moreover, contemporary popular culture is about market-directed activities intended to yield large profits, while personal success is certainly assigned to those individuals who enjoy huge incomes in providing that entertainment. (Betts 1)

What determines popularity today is the strategy of *mainstreaming the products of culture* – making them most likely *on* in terms of availability, approachability and economy. Popular culture occupies the central space of cultural dominion. It is the largest, most visible and dominant field for the process of social taste formation. It is also what most accurately reflects the taste and decides about its cultural *onness*.

In 1957 Richard Hamilton drafted a set of attributes to describe the idea of Pop Art. The attributes he proposed can be extended to the general condition of the popular and the trajectory of its development. Hamilton states: Pop Art is “popular (designed for a mass audience), transient (short-term solution), expendable (easily-forgotten), low cost, mass produced, young (aimed at the youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business” (Stilez, Selz 296). Even if some of the attributes do not reflect the nature of contemporary popular culture (like “low-cost,” which at the level of production, should be changed into “high-cost,” or “witty,” which should be replaced with “cunning”), they help explain the idea of *onness* inherent in it. They also help to outline the cultural *off*, and complete the map of culture with a description of landscapes beyond its main terrain. As proposed by Mark Booth in his 1983 book *Camp*, Hamilton’s list can serve to name the ambiguity between pop and camp (29).

The comparison presented in the table below is not identical with the one proposed by Booth. It has been slightly amended to make the distinction more contemporary. Words given in bold are meant to underline characteristics that are still valid for the aesthetics in question; whereas words added in square brackets replace the original term or provide an explanation for the already existing one, if that one remains highlighted. Whether changed or retained from the original shape, these terms carry important information on the quality of pop and camp; they also enable the approximate locating of both terms within the territory of culture, leaving no doubt that pop represents a cultural centre and camp the cultural marginal.

POP	CAMP
Popular	Easily accessible
Transient	Determinedly facile
Low cost [high cost]	Trashy
Mass-produced	Mass-produced
Young	Youth worshipping
Witty [cunning]	Witty
Sexy	Mock sexy [pornographic]
Gimmicky	Willfully hackneyed [seemingly familiar]
Glamorous	Mock glamorous [Divine]
Big business	BIG BUSINESS

(see: Booth 29)

Camp creates a fringe *off* aesthetics, whose *offness* stands for its artistic character and for the manner in which it uses strategies shared by many forms of art and entertainment. Although often mistaken for other styles, it produces unique versions and interpretations of universally employed themes and techniques. A good example here may be the *Hairspray* movies: the 1988 one by John Waters, and the more recent 2007 production by Adam Shankman. The films are almost identical: their plots remain almost unchanged, and, according to critics, the director Adam Shankman managed to “preserve the inclusive, celebratory spirit of John Waters’s movie” (Scott). But despite a seemingly general affinity, these two productions differ in almost every respect. They differ to a degree that enabled several reviews to describe Shankman’s *Hairspray* as “the sickening concentration of sweetness” (Salwa, Mossakowski), dancing over the remains of camp, and Waters’s film – “one of the best camp movies in the history of cinema” (Salwa, Mossakowski).

The case of the *Hairspray* movies proves that camp is an inimitable style. It confirms that “when (self-)parody lacks ebullience but instead reveals (even sporadically) a contempt for one’s themes and one’s material [. . .] the results are forced and heavy-handed, rarely Camp” (Sontag). Adam Shankman is not John Waters, which mean he is not “The Pope of Trash,” “The Baron of Bad Taste,” “The Duke of Dirt,” “The Sultan of Sleaze” or “The Anal Ambassador.” And even if *Hairspray* is Waters’s “most wholesome, least naughty film” (Scott), it proposes a combination of all the essential camp features, which are scarce (if not totally missing) in Shankman’s production.

Contemporary constructions of popular culture have very little in common with what is, and should be, understood as camp. However, the constant permeation of these two aesthetics – the exchange of styles and borrowings of attributes between the two – fuels the confusion concerning the nature of their coexistence. Popular culture misuses camp. It incompetently steals its style, ignoring its history and cultural tradition. Pop’s recent tremendous fascination with camp becomes very abusive. One by one, new icons of camp are being appropriated by mainstream culture, as well as numerous new saints of camp being ordained from among the pre-eminent stars of the pop-business. This intensifies the already intense puzzlement in defining and recognizing each of the aesthetics. It also produces incomprehensible examples for both pop and camp, and alters their “formal characteristics” – particularly of camp – leading to misunderstandings and misconceptions of its forms and manifestations.

The fantasy of the popular and the *fantabulosa* of camp

In a critical book *Making Camp. Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, that aims at “identifying and examining ways in which resistive possibilities might be realized through camp in the broader context of contemporary mediated conventions and practices” (Shugart, Waggoner 13), its authors Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner have attempted to find correspondence between “normative dimensions in mainstream contemporary popular culture fare” and “the elements of play and critique that are inherent to camp in any guise” (3). The authoresses have employed “contemporary and popular camp texts” (3) and applied them to select modern pop icons of camp.

The characters chosen by Shugart and Waggoner – Xena the lead character from the fantasy television show *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Karen Walker a character from the sit-com *Will & Grace*, and the pop singers Macy Gray and Gwen Stefani – are not only forced applications of camp style and its false recognition in popular culture, but a misinterpretation that fails to understand persona and the constituent parts of camp pose. To justify their choices, Shugart and Waggoner explain

Our rationale for selecting these particular cases for analysis includes the following criteria: first, a “camp” aesthetic – understood at the most basic level as over-the-top, playful, and parodic – clearly marks each of them and is easily apprehended by audiences. The figure of Xena, an action/fantasy heroine set in days of yore and modeled on similar figures, such as Hercules and Wonder Woman, arguably is inherently camp merely by dint

of her moorings in that genre. In different ways, Karen Walker also is “campy” insofar as her character is an extreme parody of the spoiled, incredibly wealthy socialite. Although Macy Gray and Gwen Stefani are not characters, their public personae also feature strong camp sensibilities; Gray is known for her almost cartoonish “retro” 1970s Soul Train aesthetic, and Stefani is renowned for mining highly recognizable icons and aesthetics from the past and incorporating them, in excessive and ironic ways, into her public persona. Thus, each of these women embodies and reflects the camp sensibility that pervades popular culture in general and popular media fare in particular. (14-15)

The reasons behind the choice of the four characters reveal a very selective approach to camp. They also reveal how popular culture misunderstands, simplifies and abuses camp at various levels. In the case of Xena, the confusion stems from the misunderstanding of the notion of the *fantastic*, which results in mistaking the fantasy genre for camp’s *fantabulosa*. For Karen Walker, it is the combination of the exaggerated and homosexual that, “understood at the most basic level,” are always obliged to be of camp quality. For Macy Gray, it is the conviction that anything “old school” stands for the campy anachronistic; whilst for Gwen Stefani, whose case is a classic example of pop’s abusive approach towards camp, it is mistaking artistic *bricolage* for “true” acts of travesty and transgression.

Drawing a demarcation line between pop and camp would be a barbaric act. Even such a *bad romance* has moments of intertwining, interweaving and permeation. Pop and camp have their history, and traces of camp can be found in products of popular culture (RuPaul’s *Drag Race* is an excellent example of camping in popular media). We must, however, remember that camp and pop result from different facets of creativity, they depend on different criteria and serve different purposes. Camp aesthetics entered the popular scene to transgress the norms imposed by the symbolic order. To make itself acceptable and, consequently, appreciated, camp has reached for the icons of pop to create its mainstream persona. It is camp that uses popular culture – mainly by means of preserving the memory of its heritage, and impersonating, thus reincarnating, what popular *throw-away* culture finds no longer expedient – and through a risen sentiment and familiarity makes its way into the everyday. The look of Valentino, Marlene Dietrich’s swoons, the parted lips of Judy Garland, the laughter of Betty Davis. Camp decodes the pop-cultural value of things and practices them through its own needs.

Shugart and Waggoner analyze the characters by use of four main categories: *image or style*, *same-sex love*, *love of the past* and *the fantastic*. The categories can serve as a means of comparison between pop and

camp, and if we use Booth's chart as a model, we see that they produce different sets of attributes:

	POP	CAMP
FANTASTIC:	Super-natural	Super-unnatural
SAME-SEX LOVE:	Homosexual	Queer
LOVE OF THE PAST:	Old-school	Anachronistic
IMAGE/STYLE:	Stylization	Posing

As shown in the chart, each of the categories takes on a different hue in each of the aesthetics; each works differently in pop and camp and is translated into their cultural practices differently. *Same sex love* in popular culture translates as "homosexual," with references to the notion's development from blasphemous, forbidden and kept separate ("ghetto") through to, "assimilated" and politically correct. Camp's representation of same-sex love maintains its queer status. Although looking for its path to society, rejects assimilation as adaptation and adjustment, and wishes its representations to remain: "closeted," "marginal" and "estranged."

For the *fantastic*, pop perceives it in a way that binds it with the cultural genre. It translates it as "super-natural" unreal, impossible, unknown, unseen, shapeless and esoteric. In popular culture, the fantastic represents a mode, which, as Rosemary Jackson states in the context of literary texts, "does not give priority to realistic representations" (14) and embraces "myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms 'other' than the human" (14). Pop's understanding of *fantasy* is founded on precise definitions of "the real" and "the possible," and on a distinction between reality and non-reality, which serve as a basis for the construction of alternative worlds. In camp, on the other hand, the fantastic is seen from beyond the norms and conditions of the real; it is understood in terms of possibility and accessibility, manifesting itself by means of the "super-unnatural," hyper-real, bold, overly-shaped, material and vulgar. Using its excessiveness, camp creates alternative interpretations; it does not create alternative worlds but new meanings of the old senses of reality.

The same attitude is also reflected in camp as a style. In camp, as Quentin Crisp describes in *How to Have a Lifestyle*:

[s]tyle is not a man; it is something better. It is a dizzy, dazzling structure that he erects about himself using as building materials selected elements from his own character. Style is the way in which a man *can*, by taking thought, add to his stature [. . .] Style is never natural; its nature is that it

must be acquired. The finishing touches of style are best self-taught but the basic exercises that lead to style can be learned from others. (9)

Image production in camp relies on an exchange of elements; it is the process of a flow of components, that when picked, undergo transformation to produce alternative versions of the original, subsequently becoming original themselves. Camp's image is based on "the glorification of character," it is "Being-as-Playing-a-Role," achieved through the love of "artifice and exaggeration" (Sontag). In pop, image is created by a lack of detachment from reality, or, like in the case of its version of the *fantastic*, with an awareness of consciousness as a division into life and fantasy. Popular culture distinguishes between real-person and stage-persona. Its stylizations are aware of their temporality and artificiality. Even if shocking, the stylizations know their addresses and their expectations, and work hard to please them. Unlike camp, pop images are trend-setters; camp style is a trend-deconstructor. Camp does not look into the future. It cherishes the past: "the relation of camp taste to the past is extremely sentimental" (Sontag). Camp holds a memory of the things now gone, pop recycles them.

Disruptive conclusion: *glamorous vs. divine*

When Sontag wrote *Notes on camp*, "camp [was] the relation to style in a time in which the adoption of style – as such – has become altogether questionable" (Sontag). Today camp is the relation to style in a time when the adoption of style is unquestionably and absolutely necessary. The contemporary popular culture is nothing but a stylization-driven conglomerate of images. If we assume that an image is not a reflection of one's artistic self but a product aimed at meeting certain expectations, the difference between pop and camp arises right before our eyes. Camp is not about an image – it is about posing, and a lifestyle. Unlike pop, that pretends to embody artistic uniqueness (of its subjects), while offering commercially driven products of entertainment, camp proposes "performative acts" that reject the idea of popular glamour. To make camp is to be *divine*. To be *divine* means to be: outlandish, freakish, over-exaggerated and tacky. The *divine* becomes materialized when the form transcends the content and operates within the realm of the abnormal and the uncommon. The *divine* in camp means grotesque, ironic, over-aesthetic. It eludes simple moral judgments, is alluring, playful and, although artificial, is a celebration of human nature.

The reason why *Hairspray 2007* can never be camp is simply because it lacks *Divine*. John Travolta turned out to be incapable of producing the

accurate camp-divine effect, managing only to achieve a mere piece of divine pop. The presence of Harris Glenn Milstead, known to the American audience as Divine, secured Waters's *Hairspray* the camp shape and style, the director has attempted to maintain throughout his cinematographic career. Unlike Shankman's film, where Edna Turnblad, "a shy, unsophisticated working-class woman, ashamed of her physical size" (Scott) played by Travolta, undergoes a tremendous makeover, Waters's movie remains far from the demands of such aesthetic-eugenics, changing his Edna from under-dressed Divine into over-dressed Divine.

Camp adores imperfections of nature. It loves its vulgar and coarse sides, showing them by means of travesty. Camp decorates the natural but does not beautify it. It accepts and highlights what is monstrous about people and exposes their unnatural (inhuman) elements as a warning against the monstrosity of nature. It demonstrates the essence of what is hidden behind the pose, in an attempt to familiarize and describe the queerness and weirdness of the natural. In this respect, camp is "a lie that tells the truth" (Core 1). Popular culture is exactly the opposite. It is a realistic narration that produces images falsifying the natural. Popular heroes and heroines – with their slender bodies, symmetrical shapes, harmonious movements and impeccable characters (Barbie Doll, Doctor Quinn, MacGyver, Rambo) are constructed to hide or correct the weaknesses of nature and create worlds that, although realistic, are almost totally unreal. Pop-cultural representations are what they are expected to be. This is what makes them mainstream and *on*. The products of camp are peripheral – *off*. Pop is rarely aware of its aesthetic choices – it chooses stylizations and changes them without constancy. Camp is consistent and very specific about the choice of style and manner of posing. As Booth observes, "[c]amp is [...] a matter of a raised eyebrow, a secret smile, an almost imperceptible pout or the barest suggestion of the limp wrist" (42) – all well-thought-out and meticulously planned. "Connected with camp exclusivism is the notion of divine decadence" (82), and to look for contemporary camp is, thus, to search beyond the glamorous – it is to search for the *divine* and carefully recognize its manifestations, remembering to always give back to pop's, and to camp what is camp's.

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TRADITIONAL KITSCH AND THE JANUS-HEAD OF COMFORT

C. E. EMMER

The impression one may easily get from reading Clement Greenberg's 1939 "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and many of the other selections in Gillo Dorfles's canonical 1969 collection, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*,¹ is that kitsch is a real thing and that it is obvious not merely that kitsch is worthy of serious discussion, but also that it needs to be confronted in some way, at the very least analytically, and perhaps also on a more practical plane. In particular, one encounters again and again, in these and similar texts, a sharp opposition – or at least a valiant attempt to maintain a sharp opposition – between high art and kitsch.

Over the last few decades, however, another view of kitsch has come to the fore: namely, the idea that, on the one hand, particularly since the advent of postmodernism, the sharp divide once upheld between fine art and popular culture can no longer be realistically maintained, and that, on the other hand, both high art and popular culture do no more than reflect the taste preferences of particular subcultures – subcultures which, as was just mentioned, can no longer be so easily kept apart.

Sociologists, for example, argue that a sharp distinction between "high" and "low" culture does not stand up to empirical investigation. David Halle, in his *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* entry on "high" and "low" culture, points out that not only have cultural distinctions been levelled in the United States by the rising percentage of US citizens with a college education, but also that studies of supposedly "low" culture have "challenged, on empirical grounds, the earlier claims that the products of 'popular/lowbrow' culture were of little or no aesthetic value and were experienced by the audience in an uncreative and unimaginative way"

¹ Dorfles reproduces Greenberg's essay in an abridged form. Greenberg's *Art and Culture* is one source for the complete version. Dorfles is still thinking about kitsch, as evidenced by the exhibition on kitsch he curated for the Milan Triennale in 2012, "Kitsch: oggi il kitsch" [roughly: 'Kitsch Today']. There is an exhibition catalog under the same title.

(2124). He contends that more recent studies sometimes even supported the claim that certain products of presumably “low” culture were *superior* in quality to products of supposedly “high” culture.

Other sociologists have directed our attention to the rise of the cultural “omnivore,” a cultural role which they argue has come to replace the former high-culture “snob.” The omnivore is a person who consumes some culture marked as classical, high art, or avant-garde, but also consumes plenty of popular culture which has no such elevated aspirations. Furthermore, even though the omnivore may still reject some forms of culture as being in bad taste, the person who exclusively consumes “high” culture – that is, the individual who maintains a dependable barrier between high culture and pop culture, and who *also rejects* pop culture – is becoming harder and harder to find (Wilson, 95-98 and 149-150; Peterson and Kern; cf. Eriksson).

Sociologists in particular have also been quick to point out that much of what is claimed about the worldviews, attitudes, and psychology of consumers of ostensibly “kitschy” items is ultimately armchair theorizing, based on nothing more than speculation. In regard to the supposition that people purchase art in order to achieve status, for example, David Halle writes (in his book, *Inside Culture*): “Not one empirical study of the reasons that people select artistic or cultural items (or other, related items) finds respondents offering status as the main reason for their choice” (6). Countering the possible objection that people might not want to admit that their motivation was a pursuit of status, Halle threw down the gauntlet with the following response: “Perhaps. But how do we know? Unsystematic data? Our own longing? For so empirically minded a field as sociology, this weak support for a central thesis is unsatisfactory, and perhaps even scandalous” (6).

In the art world, on the other hand, the advent of pop art, Warhol, and postmodernism, as well as a post-pomo period in which even postmodernism itself appears to be merely one among many options, has arguably complicated not merely Greenberg’s distinction between formalist art objects and kitsch, but even any fixed or stable distinction between fine art in general and popular culture in the first place.²

And finally, in magazines and newspapers, particularly in fashion, interior design, travel writing, and restaurant reviews, one often sees the term “kitsch” used to indicate merely a particular “flavour” of things to

² For one recent source among many, see the discussion of the art world in Stallabrass. Central to the evacuation of aesthetic considerations from the concept of art is Danto (1981) – though more recently he has revisited the question of beauty (2003).