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RECLAIMING THE DISCOURSE OF CAMP

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IN 1964 CAMP WAS PROPELLED INTO public consciousness via Susan Sontag's now famous essay, 'Notes on Camp', with its homosexual connotations downplayed, sanitized and made safe for public consumption. Sontag's version of Camp was extolled, emulated and elaborated upon in a flurry of writing on the subject that lasted until the end of the decade. Though the erasure of homosexuality from the subject of Camp encouraged the public's embrace, it also had a mutational consequence. Earlier versions of Camp were part of an unmistakable homosexual discourse bound together by a shared referent (the 'Homosexual'-as-Type). By removing, or at least minimizing, the connotations of homosexuality, Sontag killed off the binding referent of Camp – the Homosexual – and the discourse began to unravel as Camp became confused and conflated with rhetorical and performative strategies such as irony, satire, burlesque and travesty; and with cultural movements such as Pop.

The adoption, in the 1960s, of the term 'Camp' to describe so many diverse strategies produced the impression that there were many different kinds of Camp. This unquestioning attitude toward the existence of multiple forms of Camp has provided writers with access to a successful evasive tactic. By conceptualizing Camp as simply a common nomination shared by unrelated cultural phenomena, writers have been spared the task of studying relationships among the total range of expressions that have been labelled as 'Camp', or even of defining the object of study. [...] While writers on Pop culture simply deny Camp as a homosexual discourse, finding such a construction contradictory to their arguments, gay writers seeking to reclaim the discourse of Camp through a restoration of its homosexual

connotations fail to address issues of non-gay and Pop culture appropriation. These partial interpretations of Camp derive their authority from Sontag's essay. After all, according to Sontag, Camp is a sensibility; and sensibility or taste:

has no system and no proofs[...]A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea.

(1987 [1964]:276)

As long as thinkers, whether gay or non-gay, cling to the definition of Camp-assensibility,

they are invulnerable to critique, forever protected by invoking Sontag's own critical exemption. [...]

In order to produce a new reading of Camp, one that can account for its recent politicization [for example, the street theatre protests of gay rights organizations such as ACT UP and Queer Nation], we need to jettison objectivist methodologies. Objectivism, as I am using it here, refers to an empiricist route to knowledge that 'posits a real world which is independent of consciousness and theory, and which is accessible through sense-experience' (Lovell, 1983:10). [...]An objectivist methodology becomes extremely problematic in theories of social behaviour where the human subjects of study are unavoidably transformed into 'objects' of knowledge that are used to generate sense-experience for the observer. As a result, human actors are reduced to 'thing-like' status as their own knowledge and experience become rendered as a structure of neutral surfaces readable only by the observer. As a mode for interpretation of queer cultural expressions, the one-way dynamic of objectivism most often results in the erasure of gay and lesbian subjects through an antidialogic turn that fails to acknowledge a possibly different ontology embodied in queer signifying practices. Instead, we need to develop a performance-centred methodology that takes into account and can accommodate the particular experience of the individual social actors under study, one which privileges process, the agency

of knowledgeable performers, and the constructed nature of human realities. This approach provides a space for individual authority and experience that, regardless of different perceptions of sexual identity, envisions a power – albeit decentered – that is able to resist, oppose and subvert. Working with a theory of agency and performance, I will attempt the sacrilegious: to produce a definition of Camp. Such a definition should be stable enough to be of benefit to the reader, yet flexible enough to account for the many actions and objects that have come to be described by the term. Following Gregory Bredbeck's cue that it would be more productive to approach the project through a study of the workings of the Camp sign (1993:275), I will suggest a definition of Camp based upon the delineation of a praxis formed at the intersection of social agency and postmodern parody.

Broadly defined, Camp refers to strategies and tactics of queer parody. The

definition of parody I use is that of Linda Hutcheon. Her postmodern redefinition of parody differs sharply from conventional usages that conflate parody with irony or satire. Rather, as elaborated by Hutcheon, parody is an intertextual manipulation of multiple conventions, 'an extended repetition with critical difference' (1985:7) that 'has a hermeneutic function with both cultural and even ideological implications' (ibid.: 2). Hutcheon explains that 'Parody's overt turning to other art forms' (ibid.: 5), its derivative nature, and its dependence upon an already existing text in order to fulfil itself are the reasons for its traditional denigration, a denigration articulated with a dominant discourse that finds value only in an 'original'. Hutcheon clears a space for a reconsideration of parody through its very contestation of ideas of Romantic singularity because it 'forces a reassessment of the process of textual production' (ibid.: 5). At the same time, her redefinition provides the opportunity for a reassessment of Camp, when Camp is conceptualized as parody. Hutcheon's theory of parody is valuable for providing the terms needed to differentiate Camp from satire, irony and travesty; and to terminate, finally, the conflation of Camp with kitsch and schlock, a confusion that entered the discourse as a result of the heterosexual/Pop colredefinition, Camp emerges as specifically queer parody

possessing cultural and ideological analytic potential, taking on new meanings with implications for the emergence of a theory that can provide an oppositional queer critique.

While Hutcheon's theory is capable of locating the address of a queer parodic praxis, it still needs to be queerly adjusted in order to plumb its potential for a Camp theory. By employing a performance-oriented methodology that privileges process, we can restore a knowledgeable *queer* social agent to the discourse of Camp parody. [...] Yet, in order to reclaim Camp-as-critique, the critique silenced in the 1960s, which finds its voice solely when spoken by the queer, we cannot reverse the process of banishment by ejecting the un-queer from the discourse. That kind of power does not belong to the queer. All we can do, perhaps, is to produce intermittent queer visibility in our exile at the margins long enough to reveal a terminus at the end of a pathway of dominant power with the goal of foregrounding the radical politic of parodic intertextuality.

When parody is seen as process, not as form, then the relationship between texts becomes simply an indicator of the power relationships between social agents who wield those texts, one who possesses the 'original', the other who possesses the parodic alternative. Anthony Giddens[...] defines power and domination as the ability

to produce codes of signification (1984:31). Accordingly, value production is the prerogative of the dominant order, dominant precisely because it controls signification and which is represented by the privilege of nominating its own codes as

the 'original'. The 'original', then, is the signifier of dominant presence and, because dominance can be defined as such only by exercising control over signification, it is only through the 'original' that we can know and touch that power. In that case, parody becomes the process whereby the marginalized and disenfranchised advance

their own interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification. Without the process of parody,

the marginalized agent has no access to representation, the apparatus of which is controlled by the dominant order (Case, 1991:9). Camp, as specifically queer parody, becomes, then, the only process by which the queer is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility.¹

This piggy-backing upon the dominant order's monopoly on the authority of signification explains why Camp appears, on the one hand, to offer a transgressive vehicle yet, on the other, simultaneously invokes the spectre of dominant ideology within its practice, appearing, in many instances, to actually reinforce the dominant order. [...]

Andrew Ross's extremely influential essay, 'Uses of Camp' (1989), [...] is helpful in explaining the relationship of queer signifying practices to the dominant order.² Because objectivist methodologies overwhelm and obscure the processual signifying practices through which the queer articulates the discourse of Camp, the queer is erased in representation at the very moment that Camp is subjected to a dominant interpretation. Pop camp emerges, then, as the product of a visually based dominant reading of queer praxis interpreted through the object residue that remains after the queer agent has been rendered invisible. Consequently, the bourgeois subject of Pop camp must assume a queer position in order to account for these dispossessed objects and becomes, in fact, queer himself. [...]

[...] Operating from under the cloak of invisibility, the queer knows his/her signifying practices will be, *must* be appropriated. As a product of queer agency, it is the process of Camp that selects and chooses which aspects of itself will be subsumed into dominant culture. Queer knowledge can then be introduced and incorporated into the dominant ideology because the blind spot of bourgeois culture is predictable: it *always* appropriates. And it appropriates whatever the agent of Camp chooses to place in its path. The invisible queer is at a certain advantage, because whatever is offered to the un-queer will be unquestioningly received as their own invention, taken as a confirmative sign of their right to possess. [...] By inverting the process of appropriation, Camp can be read as a critique of ideology through a parody that is always already appropriated.

Notes

1 It is not my goal, here, to explain the invisibility of the queer in representation. This has

been done admirably in Case, 1991 and Morrill, 1991.

2 I use Andrew Ross's essay as the basis for a critique of Pop appropriation of Camp precisely because it has had such a major impact upon Camp theorizing.