5.6 Pack Up Your Pink Tents: Camp goes to the Gala

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Abstract

By choosing 'camp' as the theme for the 2019 edition of their annual blockbuster fashion art exhibition – and subsequent gala, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, brought this concept to a mainstream audience. On this occasion, people who might've never even heard of it before were suddenly interested in debating which celebrity guest 'nailed' the costume this year, and who was found to be insufficiently campy. However, the curator's approach based almost exclusively on Susan Sontag's 1964 essay *Notes on Camp* did little to pinpoint an already elusive term, leaving plenty to ponder on its exact meaning. Besides the obviously favorable climate for the (LGBT)Queer(+) community, which has once more received recognition – in this case for its particular brand of creativity and over-the-top exuberance which has influenced high fashion, Sontag's 2nd wave feminism does not particularly touch on the issue of diversity in the camp genre.

Keywords: camp, language, queer, resistance.

1. On the Met Gala

Since 1948, with few discreet interruptions – such as the Covid19 pandemic which delegated the soirée to September 13th (Stamp, 2021) – the 1st Monday in May (Gavin, 2019) was dedicated to New York's ultimate socialite event that is the Met Gala. Actually a fundraising event for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute (Moser, 2019), it is a place to be seen, and where celebrity and fashion reign supreme. Whilst this was true from the event's origins, the scale of it all has grown greatly in recent years. It was in the 1970s when Diane Vreeland transformed it into a one-of-a-kind party that takes over the Metropolitan Museum for one night, but perhaps most importantly, she was also the one who linked the gala to an exhibit and introduced the now ubiquitous themes (Stamp, 2021). From *The World of Balenciaga* in 1973, and up to her failing health in the late 80s, she produced 14 exquisite shows (Stamp, 2019). It was during this time that pop culture permeated the guest list which became ever more exclusivist.

1999 marks the year Anna Wintour took over as chairperson, and following in Diane Vreeland's most fashionable shoes, she put all of *Vogue*'s resources into the extravaganza. The tickets get more and more expensive, the decors more elaborate, the entertainment is powered by superstars, the guest list is carefully curated by Anne Wintour herself (Hyland, 2014). However, even in recent years, when the power of social media is her harnessed, especially through *Vogue*, guests are generally banned from using social media during the dinner (Stamp, 2019). This maintains the mystery of the cocktails in the Great Hall and the dancing in front of the Temple of Dendur (Stolman, 2020), while at the same time focusing the media attention on the red-carpet entrances with audiences all over the world commenting on the most burning question: Who did and didn't stick to the year's theme?

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Some themes (N/A, 2021) are tied to a certain designer and their influence on fashion trends, making them sort of obvious and easy to adhere too in terms of sartorial choices. Such examples are the exhibitions *The House of Chanel* in 2005; *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* in 2011, an exhibit paying homage to the departed designer that has since been replayed into a blockbuster of a show in the artist's native London (N/A, 2015); *Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations* in 2012; *Charles Jones: Beyond Fashion* in 2014; *Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between* in 2017.

Other themes leave quite a bit of room for interpretation and imagination, such as: *Superheroes: Fashion & Fantasy* in 2008; *The Model as Muse: Embodying Fashion* in 2009; *American Women: Fashioning a National Identity* in 2010 – followed a decade later by *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* in 2021. *China: Through the Looking Glass* in 2015, which celebrated Asian influence on (Western) fashion drew 815,992 visitors, making it the 5th most popular show in the museum's history (Stamp, 2019), just below *Painters in Paris* in 2000 or those times the *Mona Lisa* and King Tutankhamun visited in 1963 and 1978-9, respectively. *Manus X Machina: Fashion in An Age of Technology* in 2016 also makes the top 10; while *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* in 2018 takes the first place with 1,659,647 visitors (Solomon, 2020). This level of popularity can hardly be blamed on good PR alone, rather the relevance of the themes has something to do with it. More often than not, like fashion itself, they manage to highlight an issue we unconsciously knew existed, but perhaps didn't quite consider (CR Staff, 2019).

A good number of themes tend to focus on 'peripheries', which are especially relevant in shaping fashion since this medium, unlike other art forms is more prone to a bottom-up influence – from street-style to *haute couture*, rather than vice versa. In this category we have *Anglomania: Tradition & Transgression in British Fashion in 2006*; *Punk: Chaos to Couture* in 2013; but none other has touched upon this more than 2019's theme *Camp: Notes on Fashion*. While Anne Wintour says she leaves the show's curators an open-ended invitation in regard to the theme she also wants it to be quite clear in people's minds, making 2019's show quite the exception, as even she admits it "created a bit of a confusion" (Laneri, 2019: n/p). Confusion aside, this paper wants to focus not as much on the slippery, seemingly elusive of camp – although this too needs to be considered – but rather on the narrow and cushiony interpretation it was given. This reflects poorly on the show's overall approach as we would argue that lukewarm inclusiveness could be more damaging in potential than flat-out ignorance. But more on this later.

2. On Camp

In order to establish who best hit the mark on the theme (Osifo, 2019) on the *pink* carpet, one must first complete the apparently daunting task of defining camp (Waxman, 2019). We will also attempt to do so here by offering a wide range of interpretations from the more technical definitions to the more empirical ones, while of the same time trying to underline oversights in the way this notion made the transition from subculture to mainstream.

The Oxford English dictionary defines camp as: "ostentatious exaggerated, affected, theatrical, effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to, or characteristic of homosexuals. As a noun – camp behaviour or mannerisms." (King-Slutzky, 2010), while Merriam-Webster sees it as: "something so outrageously artificial, affected, inappropriate, or out-of-date as to be considered amusing; a style or a mode of personal and creative expression that is absurdly exaggerated and often fuses elements of high & popular culture" (Lang, 2019, n/p) and "exaggeratedly effeminate" (Brohman, 2018). Older publication though seems to believe is a form of Australian slang meaning "a low saloon" (N/A, 1964) which proves how elusive both the etymology and the use of the term actually are.

A consensus seems to be that the word's origins stem from late 17th century French (King-Slutzky, 2010), namely Moliere's 1671 play *The Impostures of Scapin* (Yotka, 2019), but has a long history of usage in upper-class English (Ross, 1998: 61). Word-of-mouth also suggest it has a more bizarre source from the acronym K.A.M.P. meaning Known As Male Prostitute (Thompson). Also in agreement is the fact that camp tends to focus on the outward appearance (Babuscio, 1993, p. 24), or more bluntly put: "style is everything" (note 40 in Sontag, 2001), which incidentally makes it a perfect theme for a fashion-forward fête. More so, camp is seen as thriving on incongruities (note 8 in Sontag, 2001; Castañeda, 2019, p. 31), which makes it sort of postmodern *avant la letre*, and just interesting and intellectually challenging enough for a grand museum exhibit.

Another consensus is seen in the meaning behind the term referring to the *contraposto* as a "quintessential

camp pose" (Yotka, 2019), and "to camp about" as a seductive and rather ostentatious action (Garvin, 2019), or rather as "a mode of seduction with flamboyand mannerisms" (note 17 in Sontag, 2001). While being seen as "fun and empowering" (Laneri, 2019), fond of artifice and exaggeration (note 8 in Sontag, 2001; Bergman, 1993, p. 5) it is also connected in most definitions with homosexuality and queer culture (note 51, 53 in Sontag, 2001; Bergman, 1993: 5; Lang, 2019), even coming to be defined as a code word for gay (Yotka, 2019), and while the two notions are not synonymous it is usually understood that one cannot have 'camp' without 'queer' (Smith, 2019).

This brings us to the core issue of this paper because seemingly all histories on the usage of the word seems to stop here and while Christopher Isherwood's 1954 *The World in the Evening* is undoubtedly seen as the words commitment to modern usage (Sontag, 2001) his interpretation on it as does not occupy center-stage. He sees camp as "a queer-empathetic medium rooted in shared histories of hurt, secrecy, and social marginalization" (Castañeda, 2019, p. 31), the show and its notes rather rely on the work of Susan Sontag which offers up a rather different approach on what she views as an aesthetic, a taste, a sensibility, a way of looking at things (Sontag, 2001). Her essay and examples are notoriously all over the place and camp as a form of self-defense (Shugart & Waggoner, 2008, p. 23) is, unfortunately, cast to the side or spoken about in hushed voices and quick sentences (Van Godtsenhoven, 2019). And even when so-called low-brow yet iconic examples of camp are named, there are no correspondences in the show itself, one reads about the effect Josephine Baker's flap-era sequins have on her black skin (Van Godtsenhoven, 2019), and yet the mannequin is white… they all are.

The Polari language for instance manages to go utterly unmentioned even though within its 'camp' literally means 'homosexual', just like 'drag' literally means 'clothing', or 'a special outfit' (Richardson, 2005). The use of Polari is strongly connected to the United Kingdom where it permeated popular culture, but as it turns own a misfit's language that combines terms from Romani, Italian, Yiddish, Cockney, rhyming slang, back-slang, and Cant – an 18th century language of the travelling performers, carnival workers, and seamen – just doesn't cut it the gilded halls of the Metropolitan Museum. Not when compared to Sontag's austere intellectual exercise at least. Even though the language fell out of use following decriminalization of homosexuality there is a strong history of resilience behind it.

Omitting the usage of Polari from the discourse is just as damaging as leaving out the origins of the pink triangle as a symbol of the gay community and the literal reversal it had to go through to imply survival since it was reclaimed from a mark of discrimination and genocide (Finkelstein, 2017) since it identified gays and lesbians in the Nazi concentration camps. One cannot help but wonder if the idiom 'row of pink tents' meaning "someone who appears to be incredibly, stereotypically gay" in British slang (Cracky, 2003, n/p) doesn't reference the famous *Silence = Death* graphics poster used during rallies and protests. The poster design was created in late 1986, while the idiom "camp as a row of tents" by far outdates it especially in Australian publications (Tréguer, 2020), however, there is no indication of when the color pink was attributed to said row of tents as both idioms are in use, so the association might as well be true.

55 years later, the essay that made Susan Sontag famous (Moser, 2019) features heavily in the show. But at what cost? Is there such a thing as misstep, or could it be the case of discrimination that poses as inclusion just in order to check a box? We can argue that choosing to focus on it while barely mentioning minorities' views (N/A, 2019) leads to a gap in the understanding of the meaning behind the term and its usage. It is the case with many subcultures that even when they do eventually surface only a small fraction of them is visible; this superficial and frankly quite elitist view, that showcases Oscar Wilde but forgets to mention the Polari language, with infinitely more complex implications, suggests that the intention might have been to build up the prestige of the phenomenon through a scholarly approach. But camp is ironic and so is the fact that taking things too seriously is the un-campiest thing they could have done.

3. On Implications

One of the most problematic aspects of using Susan Sontag's essay as a jumping board for the exhibit's theme is the 2nd note in her essay about camp being "depoliticized, or at least apolitical" (note 2 in Sontag, 2001). Even though she herself recanted this opinion later on (Frank, 1993, p. 179), the very idea of it should seem outrageous for the opening on an essay on camp, and one dedicated to Oscar Wilde at that! If his dandyism was not political, then one might as well attribute his going to jail to foolishness. This premises could both hurt his memory and demonstrate a lack of understanding of camp. The fact that she went back

on this note in 1975, post-Stonewall riots, is blatant, but even during the original essay she seems to contradict herself in note 52 that admits that "camp for homosexuals has something propagandistic about it (...) they are legitimized in society by promoting their aesthetic sense" (note 52 in Sontag, 2001). But she still seems to miss the mark since before legitimizing the homosexuals, which is indeed still debatable, being or acting camp could be a dangerous tell.

Sontag's shallowness or even disinterest on the matter of camp was noted by scholars several times with her work being called "unproductive" (Bergman, 1993, p. 8), "purist" (Ross, 1993, p. 63), "superficial" (Frank, 1993, p. 160), and "Camp Light" (King-Slutzky, 2010). Essentially her work has for decades been criticized for its narrow approach, with voices going so far as to say she "edits the gay out of camp" (Cleto, 1999, p. 21). So why then, has the Met decided to – quite literary – go with her voice (N/A, 2019) over so many others whose work in this field sees far beyond her essay (Bergman, 1993, p. 9), the title of the show itself is clearly based on her essay (Moser, 2019), as well as much of the presentation. There is perhaps no easy answer to this question. Maybe it was her notoriety above the others, but worse, maybe the answer lies in the fact that her 2nd wave feminism provided *just enough* inclusivity to be deemed acceptable.

This is not to say that there wasn't an underlining gay discourse throughout the show, as even Sontag's essay is not entirely free of it (see notes 51, 52 in Sontag, 2001). There is no way of escaping it when touching camp (Babuscio, 1993, p. 20; Dyer, 1999, p. 110; Smith, 2019). There isn't a single mention (Van Godtsenhoven, 2019), however, of its backstreet origins, on the hypothesis of its raunchy etymology, and no nod towards the Polari language. And with precious few exceptions (Smith, 2019), none of the other scholars dedicated to camp seem to be too eager to showcase them either. One media voice that stands out is that of Jame Jackson, who in an essay that lacks bitterness directly says camp featured in brown and gay communities before it was trendy going on to mention Polari (Jackson, 2019).

This proves that the omission almost certainly goes beyond the differences between American and British culture and the show's overall focus on high western art signals it might be guilty of offering a simplified and dare-we-say sanitized version on the theme. Sure, there are puns about 'bums' (Yotka, 2019), but does that truly suffice? How about instead of puerile views and snobbish definitions the Met's curators chose to carry an honest conversation? But asides from this being one big missed opportunity, it is also something more worrying than that. It signals that gay America is artsy, liberal, fun... and white, rich beyond measure it leaves behind the raw, DIY, flashy... and brown looks and roots. There seems to be a consensus that camp is "infused with the possibilities for resistance as long as the viewer chooses to construct it that way" (Shugart & Waggoner, 2008, p. 44), but even this aspect seems to be glossed over in the exhibit in an at-best goes-without-saying manner.

Instead of providing a U.S.-centric view on the matter the show could've gone much deeper, especially because Polari is not the only queer coded language out there. Brazil has pajubá (or bajubá), an LGBT resistance language that fuses Portuguese and African dialects, particularly Nagô and Yoruba (Reif, 2019); as well as Swardspeak in the Philippines which combines English and Tagalong (Morton, 2016). Much like black-speak (Jackson, 2019) what all these languages have in common is that they trickle down into regular vocabulary, especially through younger people, who use them while at the same time missing a crucial part of their history (Jackson, 2019). And when *RuPaul's Drag Race* audiences are through the roof, one cannot help but think that they could do with a bit of educating on the matter – *Yaaasss kween*, I'm looking at you.

Sure, one could argue that we, as a society, have soared beyond the need for these coded languages that are deemed unnecessary since we are all just so accepting, and yet appropriation of form regardless of history and content should still not happen in a 'woke' culture. Along with the increased visibility of the LGBTQQIA+ community there appeared to be a renewed interest in the culture and even half-forgotten language (Richardson, 2005), Polari even featuring in the lyrics of a song on David Bowie's last album (O'Leary, 2017), proving once more that he is nothing if not a camp icon. The Met Gala theme itself pushes camp towards the mainstream in this "temple of establishment" (Moser, 2019), but one cannot help noticing how fickle the interest of it truly is. In this sense, we can argue that the one guest who truly stuck to the subtlety of the theme and even commented on it's evident (if you knew where to look) drawbacks was Lena Waithe. The screenwriter, producer, and actress jumped at the opportunity to draw on her personal belonging to two different minorities as a gay person of color and wore a tailored Pyer Moss suit with the words "Black Drag Queens Invented Camp" sprawled on the back and with highly-detailed buttons shaped like key figures in black history (Garvin, 2019) – talk about being apolitical.

Inclusion is an infinitely tricky subject, let us take the TV show *Modern Family* for example, which has been in turn lauded for its history-making approach to gay marriage (Rose, 2013) as well as deeply criticized for its stereotypical – and yes, camp – portrayal of gay characters (Romio, 2017). We choose to highlight it here because in one of the show's more serious moments it profoundly showcases what is perhaps the essence of camp in regards of performing gender: "when men impersonate women, consciously assuming the feminine in exaggerated form, they enact as a parody of femininity that reveals its constructed nature and offers critical distance necessary for resistance" (Shugart & Waggoner, 2008: 16). In other words, campiness can function as an exaggerated mask that eventually becomes a shield: one cannot be the butt of the joke if one is in on it. "You are not making fun *of* it, you are making fun *out* of it" (Isherwood in Castañeda, 2019, p. 38).

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