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FROM MARGINAL TO MAINSTREAM: THE QUEER HISTORY OF CAMP AESTHETICS & ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF CAMP IN HIGH FASHION

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FROM MARGINAL TO MAINSTREAM: THE QUEER HISTORY OF CAMP AESTHETICS
& ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF CAMP IN HIGH FASHION

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Abstract:

'Camp' has become a buzzword in fashion over the last few years, due to a rise in popularity following the 2019 MET Gala theme, "Camp: Notes on Fashion." Based on Susan Sontag's 1964 book "Notes on Camp," the event highlighted many aesthetic elements of Camp sensibilities, but largely ignores the importance of the LGBTQ+ community in Camp's development. In this piece, I highlight various intersections of Camp and queerness over the last century and attempt to understand Camp's place in High Fashion today.

Introduction: Notes On Camp

The Costume Institute's annual MET Gala is one of the most anticipated events in the fashion world. Anna Wintour, Chief Editor of American Vogue, holds immeasurable influence due to this annual event, as it appeals to fashion insiders and mainstream audiences alike. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the last MET Gala theme in 2019 was, simply, "Camp: Notes on Fashion." Based on Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," this seemingly innocent theme sparked controversy among academics.

In Sontag's essay, she first describes Camp as "a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon." Through the rest of the essay, she deems providing a definition of this impossible to do, and instead opts to feature a series of points which highlight the "essence of Camp." According to her essay, Camp is many things, but at its core it is frivolity for frivolity's sake. Camp transcends morality and aesthetics. Camp is playful, excessive, and a bit tongue-in-cheek, but there is always complete earnestness and naivety in its conception. She writes, "Camp which knows itself to be Camp is usually less satisfying." Even in this series of notes, Sontag essentially defines campiness as something that can not intentionally exist, and much less exist in the mainstream.

Overall, Sontag's assertions of Camp are thorough and clear. Yet, a crucial aspect of Camp remains dramatically unexplored in Sontag's essay, and therefore lacks mainstream understanding: queerness. She briefly discusses the aesthetic superiority of androgyny, as she views the departure from one's own sex the "most refined form of sexual attractiveness." It isn't until notes 51-53 that Sontag addresses the queer origins of Camp writing, "Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would."

Would they have, though? Throughout history, and even today, members of the LGBTQ+ community have been marginalized and discriminated against to the point of feeling unsafe or unable to even express their sexual identity. Fashion has always been a form of communicating with the world, in the sense that clothes allow one to align themselves with particular social groups. Uniforms may identify one's place of work, and a certain aesthetic might identify one's involvement with a specific subculture, which can speak volumes about their tastes and opinions (goth, punk, etc). Because dressing is so personal and is an act of communicating authenticity, the development of Camp can only be attributed to the queer community. Without their distinct tastes and needs, the aesthetic would have been something completely different.

The first usage of the term Camp in reference to aestheticism was in 1909, when it became part of "homosexual slang" (Merriam Webster), though perhaps camp sensibilities can be traced back to the lavishness of 18th century France (Sontag, 1964). From a linguistic perspective, camp has always been related to the LGBTQ+ experience. The queer community is responsible for developing camp, and it is necessary to highlight this when speaking about camp.

Though Sontag can be credited with popularizing the aesthetic of Camp, it still existed before she wrote about it. Christopher Isherwood, an openly gay novelist, discusses Camp in his 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*, published ten years prior to Sontag's work. In his novel, two characters discuss and define both "High Camp" and "Low Camp," highlighting three main points. First, protagonist Stephen Monk says, "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." Second, he uses the terms "fun and artifice and elegance" to describe Camp. The definitions Isherwood lays out are almost identical to those presented in Sontag's later essay, as she borrows from this novel but still discredits the necessity of queerness in Camp.

This paper will focus on the development of camp fashion over the last century, beginning with the Weimar republic of Berlin in the 1920s and extending to present day High Fashion. While not every piece of queer aesthetic is Campy in nature, there is an inherent element of queerness in Camp aesthetics. The goal of this paper is to use historical contexts to make sense of Camp's place in the modern High Fashion scene, which is celebrated by some and adamantly rejected by others. When discussing forms of art, conversations about claims and ownership can get complicated, as there are some universal "rules" to making art, and everyone seems to be borrowing from others. Still, I will be exploring the following ethical questions on Camp:

1- If camp is an inherently queer aesthetic, is it moral to adopt it into non-queer spaces? Is this a form of cultural appropriation, in the same way wearing bindis or box braids may be considered appropriation? What psychological affects might this have on queer artists? How does this change the queer experience?

2- Is it even authentically camp when presented in the mainstream? Can we intentionally create Camp, or as Sontag points out, is it only camp when the irony is unplanned? Things are Campy when they are unexpected; if it becomes mainstream isn't it expected? The sense of naivety is lost.

3- How can we, as artists and as humans, be more socially aware in our creative processes, and make safe spaces for those who need it, both respecting and promoting the work of queer artists, past and present?

Exploring Camp in the context of High Fashion is important, both because it is current, and because the High Fashion world is predominantly inhabited by those in the majority culture. Models follow Eurocentric beauty standards. Celebrities are wealthy and are able to have work

done to maintain unrealistic beauty. Events like runway shows, red carpets, and galas are where retailers look to identify what products to design at market price. The pieces available for consumption are directly influenced by this small group of affluent white people. There exists a disconnect between this and the secret, “dirty” nightclubs on society’s fringes in which camp first originated. Considering this difference, asking how Camp got to this point is intriguing.

An additional note before diving in: The pronouns used to refer to each person in this writing are as accurate as I know them to be in 2021. If in the future one’s pronouns change, I request that they be respected, and intend to change my language to validate each person’s truth.

Identity is important.

Camp in Weimar

Berlin itself is associated with “moral degeneracy,” and aside from the Berlin wall it is most known for being a “wicked little town”—vulgar, raunchy, and sinful. Things like casinos, bars, clubs, and the commodification of sex ran rampant in Berlin. In today’s culture, many of these taboos are more commonplace, but especially during World War I, such behavior was rare. Tourists flocked to Weimar to experience it, and years after its fall, Berlin is still used as an aesthetic influence for so many creative endeavors, from Karl Lagerfeld and Macy’s to the musical *Cabaret* and David Bowie (who will be discussed later on in this paper) (Gordon, 2009). Though truthfully Berlin made most of its revenue from manufacturing, finance, and publishing, the city showcased their image as the city of sin. Even police boasted the “vice and debauchery” industry. Specifically, human sexuality was put on full display in Berlin’s nightlife, and in “each nighttime establishment there was a conspicuous effort to appeal to a specific and novel perversion or erotic taste” (Gordon, 2009).

It is crucial to recognize the element of performance in this underworld subculture. The German word *Kietz* refers to a small community within a larger town, and in Weimar, prostitutes made up a Kietz. To the Kietz, like others working in demoralized professions, their lifestyle was immeasurably more liberated and exciting than others in their social class (Gordon, 2009). Yet they held contempt for most outsiders, who often shamed, abused, and disrespected the Kietz (Gross, 2014). Somehow throughout this, the Kietz developed a rich culture, completely separate from that of the mainstream. It had its own language, customs, entertainments, taboos, honor codes, and system of justice. It even produced its own weekly newspaper for four years, called the *Der Pranger* (“The Pillory”).

Of course, a huge part of this underground lifestyle of overwhelming sexuality was queerness. In Berlin, homosexuality was viewed on the same level of “debauchery” as prostitution. The increase in fluidity of dress, appearance, age, and sexual desire was unfamiliar and astonishing. The lines between male/female; gay/straight; normal/abnormal; or latent/public were significantly shaken up that a negative or perhaps fearful response is understandable.

Various lounges catered towards gay, lesbian, and/or transvestite customers. Tucked away in Berlin East was the “Monte Casino,” a hidden location where average working husbands would partake in “boy sex” behind the scenes (Gordon, 2009). Their wives understood this dynamic, and simply drank and applauded the transvestite revue onstage while their husbands excused themselves into back rooms. Once here, the usually straight men arranged oral sex with kid performers.

Contrarily, the Dielen and bars at the very core of this culture seemed to shock visitors with their casual atmosphere. There was no overt obscenity like in the casinos. Instead, they were regular, dimly lit bars for queers. Lesbians during this time could choose from around 85 same-sex Dielen, risqué nightclubs, and dancehalls. By 1924, Parisian lesbians, who had previously found sexual freedom in Paris, longed for the more widespread freedom and chaos of Berlin (Gordon, 2009).

At the beginning of Weimar, gay men actually developed a distinct mode of dress in these bars. The look included “the sailor’s blouse and cap (alongside the tailored morning-coat of the perfumed dandy)” (Gordon, 2009). In Dielen, all queer men, whether young or old, understood the marine-esque uniform. Like all modes of dress, this served as communication— first, it was a way to identify other queer people, as straights didn’t wear them at all. The sailor’s uniform was a nuanced language. Secondly, the uniforms were an “echo of adolescent androgyny,” using

silhouettes that highlight neither masculine nor feminine traits. This androgyny, or gender ambiguity, is a successful element of Camp. Throughout history, queer communities have used clothes to identify one another, and styles that are more Campy in nature are essential examples of this.



While Berlin has long been considered an epicenter of LGBTQ+ culture and a pioneer of Camp essence, this does not mean that queerness and Camp sensibilities were at the forefront of society. Instead, underground locations like nightclubs and bars provided areas for this unique subculture to emerge (Gross, 2014). During regular daytime hours, the salacious performances and bold interactions of queer Berlin were highly invisible, and for valid reason. This rich culture continued on underground, as there was, of course, a fear of public exposure within a society boasting strong anti-LGBT messages.

Laws in Berlin expressed that homosexuality was illegal and could be prosecuted. Of course, it is nearly impossible to prove someone's sexuality without catching them in a private act. Instead, the government only labeled people with "suspected homosexuality" but continued to leave queer bars and other public areas operational (Gross, 2014). This "suspected homosexuality" was not prosecutable, and so the queer subculture in Berlin continued to thrive until around 1932.

Around this time, psychology was a hot topic. For the first time, science seemed to explain and validate behavior. Two prominent psychologists of the time, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, both explored homosexuality in their studies. In contrast to modern psychology, they viewed queerness as an extremely negative symptom of deep-seeded psychological issues (Gordon, 2009). Freud's Oedipus Complex asserts that all men have an innate with their mother, and any homosexual man who lacks this is obviously unwell. Wilhelm Reich, who arrived in Berlin in 1930, made even more hostile theories regarding homosexuality. He divided homosexuals into two categories- "Subject Homosexual" and "Object Homosexual"- both of whom develop gay behaviors in public but secretly fear "savage punishment" from their fathers in response to their unnatural homosexual tendencies. These wild claims created a link between mental illness and homosexuality, furthering the idea of "otherness" and perpetuating the movement of queer folks on the outskirts of society.

Additionally, Berlin's social landscape was being shaped and shifted by the ever-increasing strength of the Nazi regime (Gross, 2014). In March 1932, Weimar's iconic male transvestite night clubs were declared an "affront to public morality" and, under Paragraph 168, Berlin's fearful government used their authority to close these clubs permanently (Gordon, 2009). This shift in power challenged the way homosexuality was handled. It is valid that LGBTQ+ people

in Weimar maintained a lowkey mainstream presence, due to the apparent dangers and discrimination. The response from mainstream culture makes clear the need for Camp sensibilities to continue in Berlin as both a way of communication and expression.

The shocking debauchery of Weimar makes pertinent revelations: First, that Camp aesthetic, meaning the performative, dramatic, ironic, anti-serious nature Sontag describes, has always been deeply intertwined with queer culture. Second, while Camp and queerness have had moments of celebration and acceptance, overall they are considered “shameful” or “dirty,” and are shunned away from mainstream society. Blatant regimes of homophobia were present in Berlin’s society, yet straight men would participate in risqué activity with other men and boys in the dark.

What has helped Camp move away from its shameful origins and into High Fashion as a celebrated style? Perhaps it is due to the fact that homosexuality has gained more of a widespread acceptance, unlike prostitution which is still shamed in modern society. When mainstream media is more saturated with queer content, that content is normalized. An increase in exposure does not inherently eradicate fear or miseducation, so both homophobia and transphobia exist in explicit and implicit ways. When straight people continue to use and adopt queer culture in the form of Camp, but do not actively advocate for queer rights, it minimizes the painful history queer folx have gone through.

Camp in Drag

Camp continued to develop post-Berlin in the form of Drag. In his 1996 book *The Drag Queens of New York*, Julian Fleisher poses the essential question, “If so much of the energy of drag is generated by its outsider status, what will fuel it if it finds acceptance, even absorption,

into the mainstream?” Fleisher understands that drag should only work when it is kept “Campy.” Drag fits into Sontag’s assertion of camp quite neatly, in that it is theatrical and performative in nature. She writes, “to perceive Camp in people... is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role.” Drag is more than just a man in women’s clothes. It is the creation and becoming of a character. It is taking on her speech, her mannerisms, her relationships, her routines. As Simon Doonan calls it in his book “Drag: The Complete Story,” drag is a “visual assault:” inherently theatrical and taboo. Much like queer performance in the days of Weimar, the appeal of Drag comes from its place on fringe society.

In the same way that queer Berlin was often confined to the nightlife, there was a time when Drag Queens would purposely keep their profession a secret. In her book ‘Mother Camp,’ Esther Newton has an interview with a queen, who vehemently prefers the term “female impersonator,” as it is more professional and creates a clear distinction between work and private life. The informant explains that there is no need to wear makeup on the street, because it “sticks out like a sore thumb;” and hesitates to explain that one can always tell when a man on the street is in makeup. Despite his own intentionality and reasoning for putting on makeup to perform and gain attention in that domain, there exists a fear of public exposure. Another female impersonator expressed his desire for respectability and social acceptance, but claimed the only way to do that was to make himself deserving of respect. This means being lowkey about his business, and not going out to eat after shows or running around to bars with other drag queens. Instead, he went to nice places with girls. “You can do anything in this life” he says, “if you do it with discretion.” Both of these encounters hold profound implications, one being that while Drag is an act of self expression and authenticity, it is confined to the stage as a response to deep rooted stigma. If a

man keeps Campiness out of his daily life and maintains it only as a professional identity, he can always quit, and perhaps find better acceptance into “normal” society.

Newton’s work speaks to the culture of the 50s and 60s, but things have changed since then. Still, there are undeniable acts of homophobia in modern society, and many reasons queer folks hold on to the same fears of the past. Under the presidency of Donald Trump, multiple laws were brought to fruition that challenged the livelihoods of LGBTQ+ Americans. Laws allowing businesses to refuse to serve LGBTQ+ people, banning transgender folx from joining the military, and enforcing that people use bathrooms that match their birth certificate rather than their identity gained support and enthusiasm. In a culture where being cis and straight is the default and where homosexuality is shameful, dressing Camp is bold and vulnerable. Choosing this style as a theme for a gala seems tone deaf and appropriative when queerness itself is still shamed on a large scale.

However, there is a clear paradox in society’s reception to queerness. Drag performance continues to grow and gain popularity finding mainstream success and acceptance against all odds. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and the increasing use of social media may have assisted this movement. Drag was always meant to be performative, and often appeared in touring shows. 1939 marked the founding of “The Jewel Box Revue” by two gay men: Doc Brenner and Danny Brown. The Jewel Box was an all-gay troupe in Miami, but the target audience for this troupe was straight. Gay men would wear their Campiest clothes and embody overdramaticized versions of queerness (Doonan, 2019.) If Camp aesthetics are intended to be consumed by straight audiences, do straight people have a “claim” over them? Despite Camp’s underground and explicitly queer origins, is it ethical for heterosexual people to adopt this style after having seen it done in above ground performance? Alternatively, because gay men owned, operated, and

performed in the troupe, is Camp still exclusively an expression of queerness? Once Camp was brought to straight audiences through Drag, the question of ownership and ethics became less clear. In Berlin, camp was queer performance enjoyed by queer audiences, but each decade brings new media outlets to spread Camp aesthetic to the masses.

Following in The Jewel Box Revue's footsteps, *Drag Race* attracts a predominantly straight audience (Smith, 2019), and 80 years later we must ask the same question about Camp's role in mainstream media. Doonan argues that overall, *Drag Race* provides positive momentum for the future of drag, relishing in newfound diversity. He highlights the increasing numbers of young children and straight women identifying as drag queens as a good thing. If nothing else, *Drag Race* may be someone's first or only depiction of queerness, and it is good that mainstream media normalizes and celebrates queer lives. Contrarily, queer journalist Hugh Montgomery is careful to solely praise the popularity of *Drag Race*. Because the show is many people's primary experience of Drag, he argues that even more diversity is needed to provide an accurate or truthful eye into Drag. Each episode seems to value one specific type of look over others, and that is overall "fabulousness" (Smith, 2019). Conventional, Eurocentric beauty standards are valued most. This becomes problematic as diversity is only skin-deep, and some queens are invalidated when they do not do their makeup correctly.



Historically, drag queens have developed vastly different aesthetics. Glamour Drag (the type Montgomery refers to) exists, but so does Comedy Drag, Art Drag, Butch Drag, Radical Drag, and others (Doonan, 2019). Many queens are dedicated to subverting the traditional definitions of beauty and using their platform to be explicit in their activism. *Drag Race* is a good representation of the talent needed to be a queen, and the struggles one faces throughout life, but ultimately leaves audiences with a narrow understanding of Drag (Al-Kadhi, 2019). When attempting to celebrate queer culture in the mainstream, we end up catering to majority culture standards, and can end up alienating other members within the queer community. This watered-down version of drag that is palatable for straight audiences is fundamentally anti-Camp.

One example of a Radical Drag Queen is Glamrou, who performs with the drag troupe Denim. Her experience with Drag is twofold, as she initially viewed it as a form of self-expression and confidence during a time when those elements were lacking in her life, but soon began using it as a method of exploring her identity as a queer Muslim (Al-Khadi, 2019). Glamrou explains that Denim, her drag comedy troupe who sing live, often have straight audiences coming to the show with very narrow expectations. They expect to see glamour, lipsyncs, and celebrity impressions, which are all depicted on *Drag Race*.



Even RuPaul himself acknowledges Drag's ability to shake up society. He has stated, "I'm not doing Drag to give you makeup tips. This has always been a political statement." Once again, the Camp aesthetic within Drag is inseparable from its sociopolitical implications. For RuPaul, Drag is a liberating act of self-acceptance and expression within a society that has ostracized him and others like him. Especially in the last four years of Trump's presidency, this reclamation of self is crucial.

Camp in Music

Following Drag, Camp began presenting itself in the music industry. The mid 1960s-1970s were a time of great social change, and also a time of great style change. Protests to the Vietnam War and advocacy for the Feminist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement were in full swing. Many young people saw clothing as a way to claim their identity within a specific group. For the first time, different "style tribes" emerged, and various ways of dressing permeated throughout subcultures (Tortora, 2015). One of these style tribes was a group who explored androgynous fashion, and the ways in which one can blur the once distinctive lines between masculinity and femininity. Some artists did more than just sing songs. Instead, they responded to this change and fully embraced their own identities. Through the seemingly fake-ness of stage names, exuberant performances, and frivolous ways of dress teetering on becoming drag, queer artists were able to presenting themselves in a more authentic way. Freddie Mercury, Elton John, and David Bowie are three performers who come to mind as the physical embodiments of Camp aesthetic.

Elton John, born Reginald Kenneth Dwight, is most known for his showmanship: energetic performances and eccentric way of dress. He was an amazing vocalist, but didn't quite

have the looks to become a sex symbol of the era. Instead, he leaned into his adventurous sense of style, and became known for his stage presence. One of his Campiest moments was at a concert in 1984, to which he crossdressed in a full 18th century ball gown, red glasses, and an elaborate hat of feathers, wire, and jewels. Another noteworthy look was at his 50th birthday party in 1997, where he donned a silver outfit, feathered cape, and tall wig, complete with a Spanish warship nestled within. The look bore uncanny resemblance to King Louis XIV, who seemed to follow Camp sensibilities before there was even a word for it. The lavishness and frivolity of the 18th century perfectly fits into Sontag's note that people either "patronized nature (Strawberry Hill) or attempted to remake it into something artificial (Versailles)," and serves as a viable source of inspiration for an equally Campy performer. In a way, John's rebuilding of his identity into something more extravagant mimics this very idea.

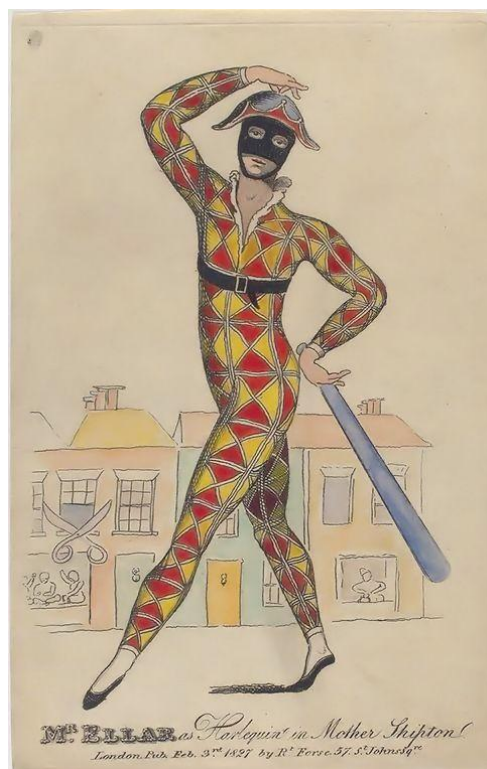


Elton John was friends with a somewhat similar, but equally effervescent and individual performer: Freddie Mercury. The Queen frontman was born Farrokh Bulsara on the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar. He completely shed this identity when he moved into music, legally changing his name and developing a unique and bold way of dress. Mercury constantly pushed the limits of Camp, not only in his overdramatic theatricality or gaudy costumes, but also in his behavior. He teased and shocked his audiences, and provided them with a definition of queerness during a time when homosexuality was just starting to be accepted (Blake, 2016). His performances were energized and charismatic, with David Bowie stating Mercury was “A man who could hold an audience in the palm of his hand.”

Journalist Andrew Woods shares his story as a young fan of Freddie Mercury. For years, he wore a sparkly embroidered Queen patch on his (otherwise straight) jacket. He intentionally highlights the unexpectedness of such an overtly Camp man maintaining a “coveted spot on a straight man’s denim.” Dress is communication, and Camp communicates queer. Woods recognizes and addresses the innate queerness of Camp, and that to some degree there is a disconnect between his experiences as a straight man and the world Freddie occupied. Nonetheless, Mercury appealed to straight masculine audiences, perhaps because he was unashamedly sexual and exuded a confidence onstage that everyone hopes to possess themselves. What he did was pure “mic-wielding rock” (Woods, 2020).

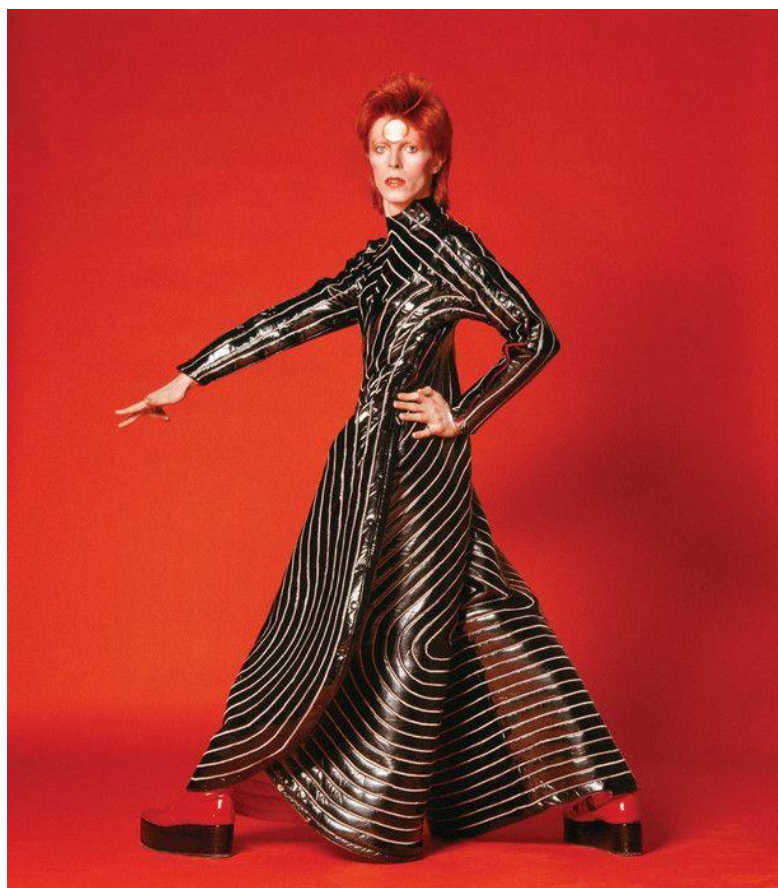
“I have fun with my clothes onstage,” he explained about his style in 1986. “It’s not a concert you’re seeing, it’s a fashion show. I dress to kill, but tastefully.” Many of these killer looks are Campy leotards, either with bold patterns or an excess of sequins. The Harlequin Leotard worn by Mercury on tour in Texas in 1977 featured a large black and white geometric print, long sleeves, footed legs, and a deep V-neck. With the leotard, he wore a pair of pink ballet

slippers. The exposure of Mercury's full chest of hair combined with the form-fitting fabric and delicate shoe creates an interesting inclusion of both masculinity and femininity. The leotard was inspired by the traditional harlequin character of *commedia dell'arte* theatre (Schofield, 2012). Gaining costume inspiration from *comedia dell'arte* and ballet is an unorthodox choice for a rock star, but is part of Mercury's appeal. By bringing the stereotypically feminine worlds of theatre and dance into the more masculine world of rock, Mercury highlights the multifaceted nature of his identity, while also breaking down barriers for his fans and empowering them to explore new performance types.



David Bowie also always comes to mind when defining Camp. He frequently took on wild personas, including Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane, the former of who, is a genderless bisexual alien from Mars. One of his campiest moments is the Tokyo Pop Jumpsuit, designed by

Kansai Yamamoto in 1973 (Ryzik, 2018). The jumpsuit was influenced by kabuki: a Japanese drama featuring highly stylized song, mime, and dance. Interestingly, it was originally called onna kabuki, where “onna” means women and “kabuki” means the art of song and dance (Lombard, 1928). Only women were allowed to perform onstage, and they played both male and female characters. It is interesting and important that Bowie chose to take inspiration from an art form that has its root in cross-dressing and gender ambiguity. Bowie’s jumpsuit featured other stereotypically feminine details, such as a fitted bodice, round shoulders, and big pants which mimicked the shape of a skirt. To complete the look and further blur the lines between male and female, Bowie sported spiky red hair, which was styled after a woman in a Yamamoto ad. The elements of this look show that David Bowie was not only comfortable dressing in clothing that seemed indirectly influenced by femininity, but was eager to wear styles that were explicitly worn by women.



It is this open embrace of “in-betweenness” and “neither one nor the other” combined with the glitz and glamour of his characters that aligns Bowie with camp sensibilities. Bowie was able to take on the changing ideas of his time and create an image that explored their depths, and also gave permission for others to explore. Beth Ditto confirms this, commenting “it just kind of gives you permission to feel the way that you feel, gender and queer. It just makes me feel normal” in regards to Bowie’s ability to slip on a pair of platform heels, or brag about being gay while married to a woman (Ryzik, 2018).

Interestingly, but unsurprisingly, Elton John and David Bowie both publicly came out as bisexual, and Freddie Mercury was known to be in relationships with both women and men, including longtime partner Jim Hutton (Blake, 2016). In these cases, Camp is successful in the mainstream, and provides inspiration and validation for others to be their authentic selves. One has to wonder if this success can be attributed to the frontmen’s queer identities. There is something familiar and natural about Camp aesthetics for them, and they therefore present it in a compelling and authentic way. Additionally, it is empowering to see queer men gain success not by hiding their flamboyancy, but by embracing it so unapologetically and vibrantly.

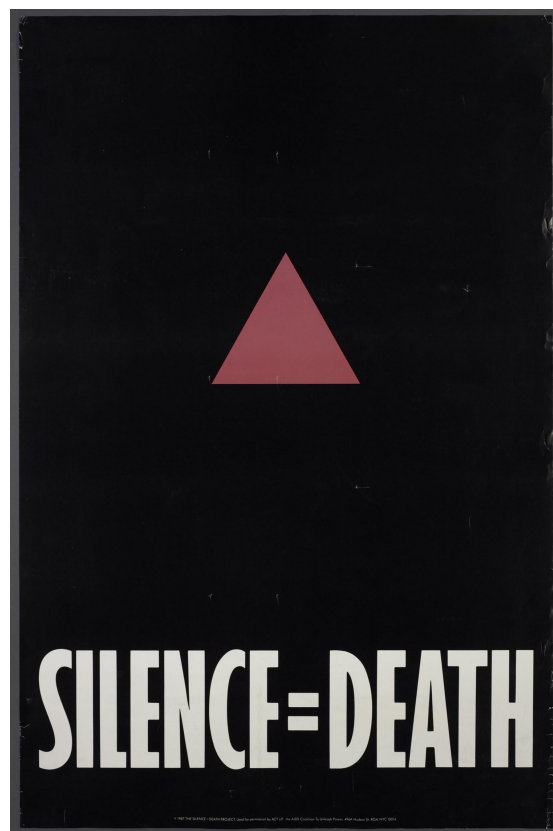
It is true that these men, despite their fame, suffered consequences of being queer in a predominantly heterosexual society. In an interview in 1964, a 17-year-old David Bowie acted as spokesperson for the “Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Long-Haired Men” in which he defended his decision to wear his hair long (Segal, 2016). In this interview, Bowie states that the group’s members have been persecuted and harassed on the street due to the style of their hair, getting questions like “can I carry your handbag for you?” from other men (Bowie Forever, 2016). It is apparent that many people, including the interviewer, had specific expectations of how one should express masculinity. The interviewer says, “A lot of people can’t tell the

difference between a man and a woman when you've got your hair that long." At this time, Bowie was just a kid, and had to explain to the adults around him how ridiculous it is to claim that a few inches of hair should change how one's identity is received (Bowie Forever, 2016).

The character Reginald Dwight created and grew into perfectly encapsulates the playfulness, performance and theatricality of camp sensibility, but it is important to understand that John's camp sensibilities grew from a place of pain and tragedy. Elton John grew up hearing homophobic ideals, and even feeling unwelcome in his own home. Even in 2019, Elton John's biopic *Rocketman* was banned in some countries in 2019, due to their anti-LGBTQ sentiments. The fight that so many queer folx must go through to be accepted or valued within their society is not yet obsolete. For Reginald, the creation of Elton was a moment of escape, solace, and overcoming his past traumas. Camp sentiments are liberating and cathartic like this for many people.

Institutional homophobia quite literally killed Freddie Mercury. He passed in 1991 during the AIDS epidemic, a time when the government held contempt for the queer community and maintained willful ignorance of their needs. As evidenced by the millions of people living with AIDS today, the disease is not some completely incurable beast that only plagues gay men as a result of their sexual behaviors. Yet by 1995, AIDS had become the number one cause of death for men 25-44, because of a government that stayed silent, and a society that joked about the plight of queer lives (Fitzsimmons, 2018). Marginalization occurs on systemic levels, and not just by friends or family. One has to wonder why Campiness is celebrated and copied, while queerness itself is still shamed. There is a certain cruelty in the majority culture picking and choosing which facets of queerness they want to consume. As long as the queer community

suffers at the hands of the dominant culture, mainstream media has no place claiming or utilizing Camp aesthetics.



Camp in Film

Though it quickly grew into a popular form of entertainment across art forms, Drag was not always positively received by straight audiences. 1960 marked the release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, a horror film in which a man in a dress horrifically stabs a woman to death in the shower. This film includes some Camp elements (androgyny and irony, but sincerity). This scene, perhaps one of the most iconic in all of cinema, left audiences with the question, "What causes a man to frock up" (Doonan), and the answer suggested is severe mental illness. This era of "dragsploitation" in film paralleled a time of emerging questions surrounding psychotherapy, and public consciousness shifted to associate expressions of queerness with insanity and sinister tendencies. Films like *The Tenant* (1976) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980), which depict a man driven to drag after a deep trauma and descent into madness and a shrink by day transvestite slasher by night, respectively, further link ideas of queerness with ideas of insanity (Doonan, 2019). When in the hands of a majority culture that already villainizes and shames queerness, these inaccurate portrayals of what drag means contribute dramatically to the perpetuation of homophobia. If nothing else, they exemplify unintentional consequences of way of dress and storytelling.

Despite increasing fear toward LGBTQ+ people in mainstream media, a vibrant underground Camp culture continued thriving. Drag-committed underground films were loved and appreciated by the queer community. Just like in Weimar, camp performances were put on by queer people for queer people, but now it took on a digital form. Three movies from this time that feature camp aesthetics in different but equally influential ways are: *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

Mark Robson's *Valley of the Dolls*'s "over-the-top excess proved to be a failure with the critics, but its embrace by the gay community revealed its true Camp potential" (Dare, 2019).

The movie is a cautionary tale about substance abuse and an exposé on the entertainment industry. The “dolls” refer to pills, the drug of choice for the three female protagonists. Despite its heavy subject matter, the film features a bright color palette, excessive costumes, a dramatic way of acting, and overall garishness that makes it Camp. Perhaps the reason so many Camp films fail to succeed in the mainstream is because straight audiences neither understand or empathize with Camp in the way their queer counterparts do. All facets of Campiness— the drama, excess, garishness— is a language within queer culture. It is how queer communities have both taken up space and identified themselves with one another. Box office failures like *Valley of the Dolls* are often good Camp, because Camp is explicitly anti-mainstream.



Doonan suggests that though the story does not cover homosexual themes, it is in essence “a très GAY book and an insanely GAY movie” (Biskind, 2020). Aside from the Camp sensibilities of the film, the ultimate message of *Valley of The Dolls* is gay-positive and validating for him. Biskind describes the movie as a “titillating tale of sex, drugs, and naked ambition in the movie business... when pop culture was struggling to shrug off the dead hand of the prudish 1950s.” A movie as raunchy as this one has to be made with a sense of open-mindedness and rejection of tradition, the absence of which is exactly what causes LGBTQ+ to suffer. Drawing attention to a heavy topic that had previously been shamed and silenced gives queer folx permission to also draw attention to themselves.

John Waters’ 1972 film *Pink Flamingos* was released during a time when drag was seen as “laughable slapstick or the prelude to a homicidal bloodbath,” and yet his film managed to achieve a warm reception (Doonan, 2019). Starring the counterculture drag queen Divine, the film centers around a criminal (Babs) who prides herself on being “the filthiest person alive.” The main plot of the movie is that another pair of criminals are envious of Babs, and try to outdo her in filth. Aside from this, the movie is simply “an exercise in poor taste,” featuring numerous scenes with nudity, profanity, frivolity, and general outrageousness. These scenes became increasingly shocking, exploring gluttony, different sexual fetishes, cannibalism, and coprophagia. The Camp sensibility is clear. This movie is the “quintessential experiment in bad taste;” and audiences love it (Dare, 2019). There is something strangely successful about having a man cast in the role of a woman but not acknowledging it through the course of the film. The story still works, and it dares the audience to question both the meaning of gender and the “utter pointlessness of respecting conventional beauty standards” (Doonan, 2019). These conversations are ones that members of the LGBTQ+ community have been having for centuries.



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Finally, Jim Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* mimics the underground cabaret culture of Weimar Berlin. Short skirts, corsets, heavy makeup, and blatant sexuality drove both of these areas. In the film, a young couple find themselves in a completely new world when their car breaks down and they approach a country home to use the phone. Inside, they discover Dr. Frank N. Furter, a cross-dressing mad scientist who is building a real-life muscle man to fulfill his fantasies. The couple are both seduced by Dr. Frank N. Furter in this raunchy, but strangely liberating film. With the same power as David Bowie performing onstage in heels, *Rocky Horror* liberated and freed its audience. "Many hetero dudes felt permission to put on kinky lingerie and corsetry" (Doonan, 2019). With *Rocky Horror*, what was once underground was overground again, and this time with a mostly positive reception.



What element is it that sets these Camp movies apart from ones like *Psycho*? It could be the playfulness and naivety of these stories that make them more appealing to queer communities and that make them better representations of queerness. Hitchcock's film takes drag—a concept entirely wrapped up in expression, showmanship, and playfulness—and turns it into something dark and shameful. This is appropriative and harmful. The Camp movies mentioned take an authentic approach and really get at the lighthearted nature of Camp. Despite their dark and sometimes revolting themes, these films work because they use Camp to validate the experiences of queer communities, and do not to push them further away from the center of society.

MET Gala & High Fashion

Today, High Fashion is influenced by street fashion just as much as it takes part in shaping it. Previously, designers would create clothes, put them on movie stars, and finally the average person would wear them. It was strictly a trickle-down process. Upper class and lower class fashion was always made distinct, dating back to sumptuary laws in France which dictated which colors or styles poor people were not allowed to wear.

However, the emergence of fast fashion and social media has made the movement of fashion bidirectional, and has blurred lines between “rich” and “poor” clothes. Clothes seen on the runway or made famous by a celebrity are quickly adapted into a cheaper, more wearable version for mass markets. At the same time, “normal people” can become influencers online, and have a role in shaping the fashion industry. They may follow both High Fashion and street styles. High Fashion designers see elements of street wear in these high profile figures, and adopt them into their own designs without regard for their cultural significance. Camp's recent

popularization can be attributed to this change in fashion consumption. High Fashion once again turns to the underground and fringe looks for mainstream inspiration.

Contrarily, some argue that Camp sensibility essentially exists within High Fashion itself. The very nature of couture models runway shows are inherently frivolous, performative, theatrical, and the “being-as-playing-a-role” Sontag describes. Doonan even makes the claim that runway models these days border on Drag. Starting in the 90s, the idea of “heroin chic” emerged, which values a very specific model aesthetic: Tall, pale, and very skinny, with hollowed cheeks and dark eyebags. This gaunt appearance is almost less than human. When paired with intense makeup, dramatic hair, and unnatural posing, runway models are no longer themselves, but are overly-curated and dramaticized versions of themselves. The ways they look and move do possess the essence of Camp.

There is also some form of naivety and earnestness in High Fashion that lends itself to being Camp. Runway shows are not intended to be a source of comedy, but at times the impracticality of the looks are laughable to audiences. We’ve all heard someone ask, “Who would want to wear that?” or “What event would you wear that to?” when seeing looks come down the runway. High Fashion is never *intentionally* bad, but is sometimes out of touch with reality in an amusing way. Nothing is more Camp than frivolity for frivolity’s sake.

With all this being said, “Notes On Camp” did make sense as a theme for the MET Gala in 2019, a High Fashion event ironically highlighting the very essence of high fashion today. The Metropolitan Museum of Art promised to “explore the origins of camp's exuberant aesthetic,” but in their presentation ignored queerness as an integral element of Camp. Erique Zhang warns that this overlooking of queer culture perpetuates the harmful but broad trend of reinforcing queer culture in a way that fully obscures the origins. For example, the language “yas queen!”

rising in popularity due to its use in *Broad City*, a show created by straight people and primarily for straight people (Smith, 2019). In an episode of the “Reply All” podcast, host PJ Vogt explores the actual origins of “yas,” citing its development from “ball culture” in the 1980s. These balls are underground events often led by queer BIPOC, including competitions and “walks” which celebrate the fierceness of queer identities. Interviewee Jose Xtravaganza explains that shouting a resounding “yas!” for performers was like “speaking code” which was “for just us, you know? It was our code against society.” Just as this expression has explicitly queer origins, Camp as an aesthetic does as well, and it is absolutely crucial to recognize these facts.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the most successful looks from the MET Gala were worn by Billy Porter and Ezra Miller, a Black gay man and a genderfluid person, respectively. Porter came to the Gala dripping in head-to-toe gold, in a one-piece outfit fashioned with sequins and glittery fringe. He donned a pair of gold wings almost as tall as him, a golden headdress, and jewels surrounding the gold makeup around his eyes. Perhaps the Campiest and “gayest” element of all was the throne Porter was carried out on, carried in the air by six shirtless men. Billy’s look touched on so many quintessential elements of camp: opulence, performance,



extravagance, earnestness, and a fully unapologetic portrayal of his own sexuality and identity. Following the gala, he wrote on his Instagram, “I truly felt like a kween today. I will never forget it.”

This is not the first time Porter has worn an unconventional look like this. In February 2019, he attended the Oscars wearing a “tuxedo gown.” The custom piece by Christian Siriano was a perfect blend of masculinity and femininity, featuring a tightly tailored tuxedo jacket on top of a full length velvet gown. At the initial fitting of his gown, Porter said, “I felt alive. I felt *free*. And open, and radiant. And beautiful!” (Allaire, 2019). Being a Black gay man, Porter has always had his masculinity questioned and undermined, and has not always felt those positive things about himself. He found that fashion is the way to express himself, explore his identity, and gain confidence in being his authentic self. “People are going to be really uncomfortable with my Black ass in a ballgown,” he remarks, “but it’s not anybody’s business but mine.”



Following Ezra Miller coming out as genderfluid in 2018, they faced a similar backlash against their identity and their expression through Camp aestheticism. Due to their roles in both the *Fantastic Beasts* and *Justice League* franchises, Miller's gender and sexuality are specifically targeted by parents who think their flamboyance may be inappropriate for children. Still, Miller continues to dress authentically. At the premiere of *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald*, Miller arrived dressed as Harry Potter's beloved owl Hedwig, in a white Givenchy ensemble with boots, spiky hair, and glittery makeup. Inked on their palms was the spell "Avada Kedavra," which brought Hedwig to her untimely death in the seventh *Potter* book. Upon close inspection, their boots were inscribed with "Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting:" another wink to fans of the *Harry Potter* stories. With this look, Miller effectively displays his Camp aesthetic in a family-friendly manner, shutting down the idea that queerness somehow equates to hypersexuality, or being unfit for children.



Ezra Miller made their MET Gala debut, and did not disappoint. They donned an outfit that was “half-man, half-woman,” perfectly encapsulating the in-betweenness of Camp, and of their own identity. The look featured a pinstripe blazer and bottoms, one leg in a pant and the other in a long skirt with a train. Underneath, they wore a masculine white dress shirt, but on top of the blazer put a bedazzled corset. Jeweled saddle shoes tied together the look. They had their nails painted, a wig on, and their makeup done, featuring an additional 5 eyes painted on their face. In their hand, Ezra carried a mask, perhaps symbolic of their public persona, or the way they feel the need to conceal part of themselves in society. This alone suggests that having a domain like High Fashion where queer folx do have the freedom and comfort to express themselves is a good thing for our society. As long as there are spheres that oppress the LGBTQ+ community, there should be spheres that celebrate and uplift them.



This is where things get tricky, and we must identify the differences between appreciation vs appropriation, allyship vs virtue signaling, and listening to vs speaking over. At first glance, an event with “Camp” in the appears to be a celebration of queer idenities, and an effective way to bring attention to queer artists and their history. It is equally easy to validate Camp as an aesthetic theme because it is merely a reflection of society. Being queer is accepted now more than ever, so fashion styles that reflect notions of gender nonconformity and sexual ambiguity naturally filter into mainstream. Even still, some may argue that fashion is ever changing and evolving, and those changes occur faster now that we live in a highly globalized world. Styles are adopted and adapted from various countries and cultures. Art simply inspires art. These statements are not wrong at all, but answers are also not black and white. Since dress is an integral part of communication, expression, and belonging to social groups, there are very real consequences of appropriating dress.

Two things about the acceptance of Camp have been made clear. As drag moved into TV, film, and music, the increased exposure to it created less shock value and therefore more acceptance. As the LGBTQ+ community continues their fight for equality, social and political changes are occurring that make queer identities more widely accepted. The almost parallel journeys of these two elements make it nearly impossible for Camp to have the same impact as it once did. Camp’s most recent adoption into High Fashion diminishes it once and for all.

In the book “Camp: Notes on Fashion” which is a dramaturgy of sorts, Bolton quotes that Camp in High Fashion is not interested in the “utterly debased form” one might find in “queer circles.” Immediately, the gala denounces queerness as a core part of Camp, going so far as to say that queer camp is a bad subgenre of it. Instead, they operate from a strictly aesthetic framework. This is immensely problematic, given the painful history of queerness and the

significance of Camp in aiding those experiences. To talk about Camp outside of queerness is to only appropriate the most “desirable” aspects of it. To choose Camp as the gala theme and to claim it will explore Camp’s origins, but disregard the value of drag and queer performance is highly ignorant.

Because authority in High Fashion still belongs to a very small subgroup of people (predominantly occupying majority culture), the claim that purely aesthetic Camp in High Fashion is “inclusive” or “celebratory” does not make sense. It is neither of those, but is instead just appropriation. As discussed previously, Camp is inherently anti-establishment, and was intended to be an escape from mainstream culture. Most queer folx did not walk around everyday feeling safe or protected enough to reveal their sexuality, so creating a rich hidden night life and flamboyant styles was literally a survival mechanism and provided the formation of a validating community. Camp is an act of defiance from queer people claiming their space and claiming their identity. Not only is it ethically questionable, but camp in high fashion isn’t even “Camp” anymore as it is trimmed too neatly, to the point of losing key features. Until fashion is made equal, there is no way to ethically consume Camp in High Fashion.

Final Thoughts

The deep interconnectedness of fashion and sociopolitical climate is evident throughout history, especially in the context of Camp and queerness. We previously mentioned how in the case of the MET Gala, the quintessential sincerity of Camp is lost, both because it is being done intentionally, and because queer culture has permeated into the mainstream enough to seem normal. Yet during the recent years of Trump’s presidency, Camp took on a new life in mainstream culture, moving away from just the artistic realms of performance (theatre, film,

music, fashion). Matt Stohl argues that at this point in history, we have possibly moved to a place where the only space left for true irony and sincere camp is at the highest levels of power and authority. He says, “The most ridiculous people on the planet are the ones running it.”

Doonan also reveals the shocking news that Donald Trump himself could be considered a Camp icon in the present day. He suggests that Trump, “with his makeup, wig, penchant for drama and exaggerated gestures” teeters on the line of being a drag queen himself. RuPaul counters this, however, claiming that drag queens are aware of the show they are putting on (Doonan, 2019). Their show is earnest and authentic, but it does not lack self awareness. Trump’s outrageousness is purely unintentional. Perhaps this does not make him a drag queen, but it does solidify Trump’s place as a “Camp icon.” For many, especially those in the LGBTQ+ community, ascribing campiness to a person who has actively spoken in opposition to their rights is difficult to do. Recognizing him as Camp would be a positive, or at least appreciative, stance (Stohl, 2019.)

If we must consider Trump as Camp, then we must also ponder the implications of Camp as it moves away from art and into social and political spheres. Similar to the appropriation of drag in psychological thrillers and slasher films, Camp’s playfulness transforms into “reckless cruelty” when it is used in political platforms. Despite its tendency toward nihilism in that “everything is ridiculous and so nothing matters,” Sontag also says Camp is enjoyable, and gives a “tender feeling” (Strohl, 2019). Matt Strohl wonders how we can find enjoyment or a sense of laughter in a leader who treats the livelihoods and concerns of real human beings as outrageous, ridiculous, and ultimately meaningless.

Historically, when Camp has been used politically, it is by the LGBTQ+ community as a way to make light of their situation through finding a voice and cultivating meaningful

relationships. Even in today's culture, Camp can and should be utilized as a mode of response to the "global rise of right wing populism and nationalism" (Bolton, 2019). It is not that we find joy in the actions of Trump or any other derisive leaders. Instead, laughing at Trump as the "High King of Camp" is a mode of survival. Despite the real-world consequences of policy and lawmaking, making light of the situation brings hope to those who need it. Ultimately, since ideas of subversion are integral to Camp, Trump himself may not be Camp at all. Rather, it is the response to him by Black, queer, and other marginalized groups that is decidedly Camp. The sensibility still finds most meaning when it comes from those outside of the mainstream.

As members of the human race, it is crucial to be cognizant of both implications of and connotations surrounding the clothes we wear. Since dress is a language, we should always be questioning what exactly we are saying. The purpose of this writing is not to deter anyone from engaging with fashion or dressing in a style they find appealing, but it is a call to do so in a way that is thoughtful and intentional. It is imperative to analyze what story Camp is telling. Understanding connotations, associations, history, and significance can better inform dressing. Intentionality with this storytelling is crucial. Below are some key questions to consider when borrowing clothing styles, to Camp and beyond.

-Ask not only *who* invented a particular style, but also *why* they did so. Is it an expression of religious beliefs, taken from a Holy text? Is it a traditional garment that is integral to cultural events or celebrations? Is it, like Camp, the physical embodiment of liberation and self-acceptance? Was it a mode of survival? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," it is worthwhile to do more research before just slipping into these looks. Understanding context is everything.

-Ask where you are in relation to that context. Are you a member of the religious or cultural group in question? Are you someone who has more social or political power over that group? Are you from a different marginalized group? As a consumer, one may fall into any of these categories. Buying and wearing clothes is a universal experience, and therefore people from all backgrounds participate in consuming fashion. However, only a small percentage of these identities are represented in High Fashion. If you fall into the same majority cultures represented here, perhaps think twice about the implications of your position.

-Ask how appropriating style may negatively affect others. Camp done poorly can invalidate authentic experiences of gay and trans individuals. Black women get denied jobs for wearing natural hair that is too “messy,” but white girls with locs suffer no consequences. Unless you are the minority group, it is hard to know when representation is inaccurate or harmful. Perhaps, then, representation needs to be done not by Anna Wintour and the other authority figures in High Fashion. Instead, these members of majority culture need to step aside and create a space for queer and BIPOC artists to promote their own cultures, on their own terms.

Appendix A Glossary:

Androgyny- is a way of dress which reflects gender ambiguity. It is neither explicitly male nor female, but blending elements of both

BIPOC- is an acronym for Black, Indigineous, People of Color, used to highlight the varying types of discrimination and prejudice

Camp- a certain aestheticism known for being over the top and performative in nature

Cisgender (Cis)- is the term used for people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, and feel no sense of dysphoria surrounding gender identity.

Crossdressing- is the act of dressing in clothes that are commonly recognized as belonging to the opposite gender. It does not have to do with identity (a male wearing women's clothes can still identify as male, or vice versa).

Dielen- is a German word translating to "hall" or "hallway," which refers to quaint gathering spots, similar to bars. Diele appealed to all, and some were specifically for queer customers

Drag Queen- refers to the stage persona which a (usually male) person adopts to perform. Drag Queens do not present themselves as men dressed as women, but instead encompass an alter ego. It is strictly performative, and Drag Queens may identify as transgender, cisgender, gay, or straight.

Folx- is a play on the traditional "folks," the x is an explicit visual signal which acknowledges the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals

Gay- is a more recent term to describe homosexual people

LGBTQ+ - is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. The + accounts for other sexual identities, including but not limited to: intersex, pansexual, asexual, and two-spirit

individuals. Two-spirit refers to Native Americans, whose culture believes that a masculine and feminine spirit can be present in one person simultaneously.

Transgender- is the opposite of cisgender. A person who identifies as transgender tend to experience gender dysphoria, and may express that their identity does not match their birth sex. Some transgender individuals go through medical transitions and could be referred to as transexual, but those who do not physically transition are not any less valid in their identity.

Transvestite- is rarely used in modern language, but refers to a person who consistently dresses in clothes that are typical of the opposite gender

Queer- means fluid, and is meant to reject rigid categories for gender or sexuality. It has recently come to be used as an umbrella term for LGBT sexualities, which an individual may or may not use.

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Appendix B Symposium Presentation Paper

I will be presenting this panel with Elizabeth and K'reisa. We will all be talking about ideas of authority in our different disciplines, and giving special attention to voices that are often left unheard in common epistemologies. I am going to be talking about the the queer history of Camp aestheticism, and pondering the implication of Camp's recent move into mainstream High Fashion.

In reference to aestheticism, the word "Camp" was first defined in 1909, when the Merriam-Webster dictionary deemed it part of "homosexual slang," meaning from a linguistic perspective, camp has always intrinsically been related to the LGBTQ+ experience. However, writer Susan Sontag can be credited with being responsible for bringing the concept of Camp to a wider audience, through publication of her 1964 essay "Notes on Camp." According to her essay, Camp is many different things, but at its core it is frivolity for frivolity's sake. It is dramatic, over-the-top, playful, excessive, and what she describes as "Being-as-playing-a-role," which means it is performative in nature. To take on Camp aesthetics is to portray a character or dramaticized version of oneself. Camp is a bit ironic, but there is always a complete earnestness and naivety in its conception. She writes, "Camp which knows itself to be Camp is usually less satisfying." Even in this original context and definition of camp, Sontag essentially defines Campiness as something that can not intentionally exist, and much less exist in the mainstream.

The one element of Camp I think she leaves unexplored in her work is the inherent queer nature of Camp. She briefly discusses the aesthetic superiority of androgyny, as she views the departure from one's own sex the "most refined form of sexual attractiveness." It isn't until notes 51-53 (toward the end of the essay) that Sontag actually addresses the queer origins of Camp writing, "Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else

would.” To which I ask, “would they have?” Because dressing is a form of visual communication, it both reflects one's own identity and connects us to others who share an identity with us. So, the development of Camp can only be attributed to the queer community. Without their distinct tastes, needs, and stories, the aesthetic would have developed into something completely different.

I begin exploring this relationship between Camp and queer identity in 1920s Berlin. At this time, Berlin was well known for its nightlife scene, which included countless bars, casinos, clubs, and other performance spaces in the underground. Many of these spaces were specifically designated for gay or lesbian patrons. Gay men developed a distinct mode of dress in these bars. The look included the sailor's blouse and cap, which reference the androgynous aesthetic Sontag defines as Camp. They use silhouettes that highlight neither masculine nor feminine traits. This androgyny, or gender ambiguity, is a successful element of Camp. Like all modes of dress, this served as communication in that it was way to identify with other queer people and within queer spaces.

Though this culture continued to thrive underground, during regular daytime hours, the salacious performances and bold interactions of queer Berlin were highly invisible due to a deep fear of public exposure within a society boasting strong anti-LGBT messages. Around this same time, psychology was growing in popularity, and people were interested in the ability to identify reasons behind behaviors and actions. Some major psychologists of the time, including Freud and Jung, drew connections between homosexuality and psychological issues. Being outed as gay also meant being outed as “mentally unstable” or “mentally unwell,” which during the 1920s had dangerous consequences.

Additionally, laws in Berlin expressed that homosexuality was illegal and could be prosecuted. As the Nazi regime continued gaining more and more power, these safe spaces were being shutdown entirely, and this rich underground culture was fully thwarted by mainstream society. This culture makes pertinent revelations: First, that Camp aesthetic, meaning the performative, dramatic, ironic, anti-serious nature Sontag describes, has always been deeply intertwined with queer culture. Second, while Camp and queerness have had moments of celebration and acceptance, overall they are considered “shameful” or “dirty,” and are shunned away from mainstream society.

Following the fall of Berlin’s nightlife, Camp was highlighted in the world of Drag. Drag has always been a performative and extravagant mode of aestheticism, which makes it a very Campy art form, according to Sontag. In its original form, Drag appeared mostly in touring shows. One troupe was *The Jewel Box Revue*, which debuted in 1939. They were an all gay troupe based in Miami, but interestingly their target audience was straight. Once Camp was intentionally brought to straight audiences through Drag, questions of ownership became less clear. Because in Berlin Camp was queer performance enjoyed by queer audiences, it was completely owned by the queer community. But each decade brings in more media outlets and ways to spread aesthetics, so the question of “who really has ownership over this?” is less clear.

Anthropologist Esther Newton conducted interviews with various drag queens in the 50s and 60s, and surprisingly most of these drag queens preferred the term “female impersonator,” and spoke quite negatively about men who would crossdress or wear makeup in public or in their “real lives.” There seemed to be a deep internalized shame, perpetuated by a homophobic society and a society which pushes them to the fringes. While Drag is an act of self expression and authenticity, it was also confined exclusively to the stage and professional life in response to a

deep-rooted stigma. If a man was able to keep Drag out of his daily life, and maintain it only as a professional identity, there's the idea that he could always quit the job and perhaps find better acceptance or assimilation into "normal society."

What is interesting about Drag is that today, despite all odds, Drag has continued to gain popularity and momentum. I think this is mainly due to the television series RuPaul's Drag Race. This show does help normalize and spread awareness of queer culture, which some say has positive momentum for the future of Drag, if for no other reason it brings queerness to the TV screens of people who might not otherwise have any interaction with queer people or their experiences. However, queer journalist Hugh Montgomery is careful not to exclusively praise the show. Because it is the primary or only source of Drag for many people, he argues that far more diversity is needed on the show in order to provide a more accurate look into Drag. Each episode seems to value one specific type of look over others, and that look is this overdramatic, hyperfeminine "fabulousness," which follows conventional, Eurocentric beauty standards. This becomes problematic as diversity they claim to have on the show is only skin-deep, and in the process they invalidate and erase many Drag Queens' experiences when they don't look a specific way.

Historically, drag queens have developed vastly different aesthetics. There are Glamour Drag queens, (the type Montgomery refers to), but there are also Comedy Drag queens, Art Drag queens, Butch Drag queens, Radical Drag queens, and so many other types of Drag that attempt to subvert traditional beauty standards and use their platform to be explicit in their activism. *Drag Race* unintentionally caters to majority culture standards, and ends up alienating other members within the queer community. This watered-down version of drag that is palatable for

straight audiences is fundamentally anti-Camp. When presented in the mainstream for mainstream audiences, Camp is no longer Camp, and Drag Race is testament to that.

Around the 1970s, the world of Drag started permeating into the music industry as well. In general, the 60s and 70s were a great time of social change, and a time of style changes. Many young people saw clothing as a way to claim their identity within a specific group or belief system. Many different “style tribes” or subcultures emerged, one being a group that explored androgynous fashion. Some famous musicians of this time, like Freddie Mercury, Elton John, and David Bowie, for example, all leaned into this aesthetic and developed it into their public personas.

In addition to this androgynous presentation, they had extravagant costumes, stage-names, and flamboyant personalities. They really took on a character that they would perform as, and this is— going back to Sontag’s definition— a perfect example of Camp. In these cases, Camp is super successful in the mainstream, which I think can be attributed to the fact that all of these men do identify themselves as queer. There is something both natural and familiar about Camp to them, and it is an authentic way to express their identities and experiences. It is empowering and validating for audiences to see queer men gain success not by hiding their flamboyancy, but by embracing it unapologetically and vibrantly.

At the same time, it is true that despite fame and general mainstream acceptance, all of these men did suffer consequences of being queer in a predominantly heterosexual society. The most extreme example of this is Freddie Mercury’s death due to AIDS. This epidemic is an example of institutional homophobia, where an entire government system ignores the pain and struggles of queer communities. One has to wonder why Camp as an aesthetic is celebrated and copied, while queerness itself is still shamed. Today, we still do see a lot of this institutional

homophobia. There is a certain type of cruelty in majority culture picking and choosing which facets of queerness one wants to consume. As long as the queer community suffers at the hands of dominant culture, mainstream media has no place claiming or utilizing Camp aesthetics.

Around the same time— the 60s and 70s— Camp moved into the film industry, and overall Camp movies did horribly in the box offices. They generally had terrible reviews and audiences hated them, except subgroups of queer viewers who latched onto these films and made them into cult classics. Some examples of these are: *Pink Flamingos*, *Valley of the Dolls*, and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I think perhaps the reason so many Camp films fail in the box offices and fail to appeal to mainstream audiences is because these audiences neither understand nor empathize with Camp in the way that their queer counterparts do. Even in movies that have Camp aesthetics but do not focus on an explicitly queer storyline do contain more “raunchy” topics like sex and drugs, and generally demonstrate an open-mindedness and rejection of tradition; the absence of which is what causes queer communities to suffer. Having movies that draw attention to topics that have previously been shamed or silenced gives queer folk permission to also draw attention to themselves and their struggles that had previously been shamed or silenced. All facets of Camp in film— the drama, the excess, the garishness— is a very nuanced language within queer culture, and is both how queer communities have taken up space and identified themselves with one another. The box office failures are often good examples of Camp, as Camp is anti-mainstream.

With all of that being said, I do argue that Camp aesthetics do not belong in High Fashion. It cannot belong in the mainstream, given that Camp is subversive in nature, unintentional by definition, and inherent to the queer experience. In the 2019 MET Gala, the

theme was “Camp: Notes on Fashion.” The most successful looks to come out of this night were worn by people who do identify as queer themselves.

One of these looks was worn by Billy Porter, who is well-known for wearing androgynous and gender-bending outfits to various events and galas, because that is part of his identity and experience as a Black gay man. He says he feels most masculine when he is wearing dresses or skirts, so this is both a very authentic and a very unintentional example of Camp. Porter does not just wear these outfits to make a statement, but wears them because they are true to his experience. When one tries to just take Camp and place it into something like the MET Gala which is owned and operated by majority culture, it doesn't work as Camp. It is no longer Camp, since those who have authority in the fashion industry lack diversity in all regards. The industry is predominantly made up of people who are affluent, white, able-bodied, fit Eurocentric beauty standards, and are overall belonging to the majority culture. Once again, when Camp is taken out of context as a mode of communication and a mode of survival by marginalized people, it is no longer Camp.

The 2019 MET Gala does briefly touch on ideas of queerness, so I do have to give credit for that. In the book “Camp: Notes on Fashion,” which is a dramaturgy of sorts for the gala, Andrew Bolton quotes, “Camp in High Fashion is not interested in the utterly debased form one might find in queer circles.” Similarly to Sontag's essay in 1964, the MET Gala does mention that queerness is a part of Camp, but almost denounces it and goes so far as to say that queer Camp is a bad subgenre of Camp. Instead, they host the event from a strictly aesthetic framework, which I think is incredibly problematic, given the painful history of queerness and the significance that Camp has had in aiding those experiences. To talk about Camp outside of queerness is to appropriate the most desirable aspects of it. It is highly ignorant to choose Camp

as the gala theme, claim to explore the origins of it, and blatantly disregard the value of Drag and queer performance.

With all of this being said, I took it upon myself to type up a really short list of questions that I think it is important to ask ourselves, whether industry professionals or consumers of fashion, which all of us are. I think these questions are super relevant for everybody, and important to ask so we can take on an intentional and ethical approach to borrowing styles of dress.

- Ask not only *who* invented a particular style, but also *why* they did so.
- Ask where you are in relation to that context.
- Ask how appropriating style may negatively affect others.