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Engaged Detachment: Camp and Homosexual Subjectivity

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Abstract. The definition of the term "camp" presents various difficulties for geographical and theoretical reasons. Although it is an ubiquitous practice in Anglo homosexual cultures, it is notoriously hard to pin down from an intellectual perspective. Susan Sontag's 1964's essay, which defined camp in terms of a "sensibility" but silenced the circumstances in which that sensibility is produced, was answered, in the 1990s, by other contributions that insisted on the specifically homosexual character of camp. This article builds on these responses to articulate a concept of camp based on its specificity within pre-Stonewall homosexual cultures, understanding camp as a discourse stemming from homosexual subjectivities in the era of repression. Subjectivity is both individual and social: it is the discursive position one occupies that always occurs in a pre-existing cultural lattice. The article links the key traits of homosexual camp (theatricality, irony, incongruity, humour) to that position by reading three distinctly camp traditions (diva-centered movies, Broadway musicals, and Athletic Model Guild gay porn) in terms of how they are linked to homosexual subject positions. I propose that, if camp discourse is "political," as some 1990s authors claimed, it also challenges the idea of "politics" as a progressive struggle. Finally, the article asks whether, given similar configurations of the homosexual experience, camp occurs in other cultures, using the parallels that the concept finds in Spain; although there is inevitably a camp discourse in Spanish culture, it is articulated by different means and requires a well-theorized attention to oral manifestations of pre-liberation Spanish homosexual culture.
Keywords: Camp; Homosexual subjectivity; Appropriation; Incongruity; Parody.

[es] Distanciamientos comprometidos: el camp y la subjetividad homosexual

Resumen. La definición del término «camp» presenta diversas dificultades por razones geográficas y teóricas. Aunque es una práctica frecuente en las culturas homosexuales anglosajonas, es difícil de definir desde una perspectiva intelectual. Sontag (1964) lo definió como una "sensibilidad", silenciando las circunstancias en que se produce esa sensibilidad; en los años noventa, otros autores insistieron en el carácter específicamente homosexual del discurso camp. Este artículo se basa en estas respuestas para articular un concepto de camp basado en su especificidad dentro de las culturas homosexuales pre-Stonewall, definiéndose como un discurso resultado de subjetividades homosexuales en la era de la represión. La subjetividad es a la vez individual y social: es la posición discursiva que ocupa cada uno, siempre existente en un entramado cultural anterior al individuo. El artículo explora esta idea de camp como discurso homosexual en torno a tres áreas que han producido dicho discurso: el cine de divas, el musical de Broadway y el porno gay de la Athletic Model Guild. Propongo la idea de que, si el discurso camp es «político», como se reclamaba en los noventa, también desafía la idea de «política» como lucha progresista. Finalmente, el artículo se pregunta si, dadas similares configuraciones de la experiencia homosexual, el camp se da en otras culturas, utilizando los paralelismos que el concepto encuentra en España; aunque inevitablemente hay un discurso camp en la cultura española, se articula con medios distintos y requiere una atención bien teorizada a manifestaciones orales de la cultura homosexual española anterior a la liberación.
Palabras clave: camp; subjetividad homosexual; incongruencia; apropiación; parodia.

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1. Camp as homosexual discourse

> To view camp as, among other things, the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to be able to do better justice to many of the defining elements of classic camp performance: the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternate historiographies; the "over"-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventrilo-

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> quistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture. (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 27-28)

The first time I heard the song "I Enjoy Being a Girl", from Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1958 musical *Flower Drum Song* I could not help but imagine that it would be an ideal opener for my very own drag act. There is nothing really gay about the number which, of course, it has been enjoyed in an eminently un-camp fashion, by many admirers. *Flower Drum Song* is about a traditionally minded Chinese girl who travels with her father to San Francisco for an arranged marriage, and dramatic conflict revolves around the clash between tradition and modernity. "I Enjoy Being A Girl" is sung by Linda Low, a spunky Chinese-American cabaret singer and love rival to the protagonist, who asserts her femininity through a series of clichés that might get her cancelled should she proffer them today in the wrong places. By "being a girl" she means she is "proud that her silhouette is curvy", she adores "being dressed in something frilly", "she drools over dresses made of lace", being "complimentarily" whistled at by guys in the street and foresees her future as a homemaker to her man. She also compares herself to a racing horse ("like a filly who is ready for the race"). If politically correct is your thing, look elsewhere.

Faced with the very enjoyable excesses of the show, my response was both very engaged and very detached. Engaged because, somehow, I felt the song, which for some audiences would be considered simply silly no matter its politics, was very much about me. Detached because of course I realized that I was not using the song in the way it had been intended and my reading was perverse. No, I do not want to "be" a girl, and yet, I feel my engagement with Linda Low says something about where I am positioned as a homosexual man. An element of my enjoyment has to do with belonging to a certain group of people. Among them there will be some who will inevitably feel like me. And in finding this communion of feeling, I felt I belonged to that group. So, my personal camp reaction implied that I was being camp with others, that I thought as others thought.

More generally, my example illustrates a number of traits about camp. The key elements Esther Newton (2018, p. 106) in her study of pre-Stonewall drag performers, proposed for the articulation of camp were there: firstly, there was an incongruity between the intended meaning and the one I was activating; secondly, there was a theatrical element, not just because this is a number performed by a character who is in turn a performer, but also in imagining it as a number in my own personal show; and finally there was humour, as clearly I did not take the whole thing seriously and, like Newton's camp performers, I felt partly the laugh was on me by imagining myself that way. For Jack Babuscio (2004), who also favoured a relational approach to camp, the four features of camp are similar to the ones identified in Newton's pioneering work: theatricality, irony, aestheticism and humour. To engage with the remaining ones: clearly my view of Linda Low's song works on a formal level (the lyric's wit) rather than on content, and there is a clear ironic twist in my very attitude to the gender ideologies expressed. For Babuscio, the notion of irony dovetails with Newton's "incongruity". Obviously, I do not believe that is in any way an ideal of womanhood and yet I could see myself performing the song.

This article, like Newton's account, and in line with contributions by Babuscio, Richard Dyer (1977), or Steven Cohan (2005), is primarily about homosexual camp, rather than "gay" or "mainstream" (i.e. non queer) camp and so it tends to engage with accounts which are based on a pre-Stonewall homosexual experience rather than more recent accounts that analyze camp as a contemporary sensibility, or use a contemporary perspective to read it into texts. In doing so I propose that the latter approaches to camp can be seen as the evolution of pre-Stonewall discursive practices. It also posits that we need to look into pre-Stonewall camp in order to define the category in a way which is specific enough and does not coincide with others like parody, irony, trash, excess or kitsch. These may be part of the camp attitude, but they are not what makes camp specific. Like those authors, I propose a delimitation of camp as a dynamic between individuals positioned as homosexuals and certain cultural objects read, interpreted or simply remarked on from that position. Finally, I will ask whether camp thus defined has clear equivalences outside Anglo cultures, using Spanish culture as my example.

Camp, like "pornography", is harder to define than it is to identify. The definition of camp has been plagued with particular difficulties, some of them compounded, rather than alleviated, by the prestige of Susan Sontag's pioneering 1964 essay "Notes on Camp". She defined camp as a "sensibility", and although it is certainly a direction I will explore, her proposal moves away from the historical coordinates that make sensibilities possible. Some of the gaps in her definition have stayed with future accounts and sometimes contributed to erase aspects of actual camp discourse that were central to their practitioners. Sontag chooses to place camp mostly in relation to high culture, and her examples show this:

> A pocket history of Camp might, of course, begins farther back—with the mannerist artists like Pontormo, Rosso, and Caravaggio, or the extraordinarily theatrical painting of Georges de La Tour, or Euphuism (Lyly, etc.) in literature. Still, the soundest starting point seems to be the late 17th and early 18th century, because of that period's extraordinary feeling for artifice, for surface, for symmetry; its taste for the picturesque and the thrilling, its elegant conventions for representing instant feeling and the total presence of character—the epigram and the rhymed couplet (in words), the flourish (in gesture and in music). The late 17th and early 18th century is the great period of Camp: Pope, Congreve, Walpole, etc., but not Swift; les *précieux* in France; the rococo churches of Munich; Pergolesi. Somewhat later: much of Mozart. (Sontag, 2018, p. 11)

Earlier in her notes she also includes *Zuleika Dobson*, Wilde and Firbank, Visconti's direction of *Salome* and other, more contemporary texts. How much of this would have been considered camp by the performers interviewed by Newton a few years later? Were they somehow updating the "camp as a sensibility" notion Sontag proposes? How much of this is implicated by George Chauncey's delimitation of camp (2005) as the language of pre-1940's homosexual cultures? Georges de la Tour? Euphuism? Congreve? Caravaggio? Let me be clear: I am not saying that Caravaggio does not lend itself to camp readings, or that, indeed, queer camp readings can be elicited by Caravaggio paintings. But I am arguing against the centrality of these in homosexual camp practice. I am also suggesting that by focusing exclusively on aesthetics and "sensibility", Sontag is missing the point on the way camp was a practice, a way of reading life and culture and favouring social exchanges among homosexuals, at a time when there was not a stable critical position to do so. Homosexual cultures had not been theorized or historicized when Sontag wrote her text, but in my understanding of the camp perspective such historicization is necessary before camp can be precisely thought through. Despite the fact that Sontag's formulation does acknowledge a tension between high and low culture more or less resolved in favour of the latter by the camp wit, her own perspective in looking at camp is high cultural and implies a high cultural perspective on low culture. Although there is some snobbishness implicit in camp, the targets of such snobbishness are probably closer to suburban double bills than the Metropolitan Opera, and Mae West is more central to my definition than Renata Scotto.

Discussions of camp need to take into account work on homosexual cultures. Similar terms, as we shall see in the Spanish case, whether kitsch, rococo, preciousness, effeminacy, euphuism, share aesthetics but are not rooted in those specific cultures. Camp became prominent enough to be discussed by Sontag because of its homosexual manifestations (presumably among what Sontag calls "small urban cliques"); everything else is, of course, worth studying, but any discussion needs to account for the homosexual connection. From her opening statements placing camp in the realm of "sensibility" she seems to be describing artifacts that have been produced by that sensibility, rather than thinking about the location of that sensibility.

Esther Newton's *Mother Camp*, a project she developed in the late 1960s, provided an implicit delimitation of the concept which was restricted to homosexual drag subcultures. Her approach was matter of fact: camp was a word certain homosexuals in pre-Stonewall bars used to refer to certain things and we need to focus on the relationship between that constituency and the things they engaged with. The 1970s saw a proliferation of work on camp, although these took the form of lists and repertoires. In his 1977 essay "Camp and the Gay Sensibility", collected in Richard Dyer's *Gays and film* (1978), Jack Babuscio proposes one of the earliest of these catalogues, with special attention to the cinema of Josef Von Sternberg, Fassbinder's *Petra Von Kant* and the film adaptations of Tennessee Williams. Philip Core's *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth* (1984) lists a number of individuals in the camp tradition. For him, camp's key trait is theatricalization of life, either one's own or others'. The most comprehensive of these catalogues of camp is Paul Roen's two volume *High Camp* (1994), which focuses on film, particularly trashy films. There is a changing but generally stable agreement on what makes a camp text or individual. The traits that these catalogues contemplate remain the same: theatricality, excess, awareness, gender stereotypes, irony, aestheticism. With different emphases, we see them repeated once and again to consider together Noel Coward and Ramon Novarro, Joe Dallesandro and Joan Crawford.

But there is a central concept, implicated in the title to Core's catalogue, which Sontag also noticed: camp always works in an ironic tension of opposites. Even if Core's distinction between lie and truth in his catalogue entries feels strained, I think contrast is at the core of the manifestations we call camp. For Sontag, such contrast tends to hinge on the "high culture" / "low culture" axis. But in doing so we may be loading camp appreciation with a moral weight (good art/ bad art) that can be misguiding.

Still, let us develop the idea that camp always implies a certain kind of tension which is kin to ironic tension. It presupposes an interplay between things as presented to "normal people", and things as perceived by the camp. The camp is an expert in articulating this tension. And this needs to be characterized as a gap between a homosexual observer and the things in the world which are relevant to his experience as a homosexual. Gender, sex and status are social and cultural discourses pervaded by heterosexuality and therefore are particularly oppressive to homosexuals, and therefore central to camp discourse.

If we look at the catalogues, many of the texts appropriated by campness have a strong element of sex and identity (with it's contrast of lie and truth articulated by the mask). In my account, queerness vs straightness is the primary opposition around which camp hinges. Everything else is something else, not camp. And sex was, indeed, the area which homosexuals had to silence. Homosexual camp is about the awareness of things that could not be spoken, an awareness expressed ironically, through excess and theatricality. Camp is not about those things, but how those things are activated by someone who positions himself as a homosexual.

Accounts I have mentioned so far tend to merge "homosexual" and "gay". It might be useful, when we discuss camp, to keep them as different stages or approaches to one's position in the world as a sexual dissident: camp, as discussed here, does not fit easily into the gay project or the gay agenda. My opening example, for instance, might be offensive to committed feminists, who are allies of the gay cause, as it seems unconcerned about damaging stereotypes of femininity. The fact it is re-read from the perspective of a homosexual does not make up, at least not completely, for its implications as part of a traditional ideology conceived to "put women in their place". Which, besides, is part of a continuum of heterosexist ideology used also to repress homosexuals.

Embracing incongruity, which is notoriously bad for politics, is probably the most important negotiation camp demands. If we assume the gay agenda needs to be a progressive one and it deals with liberation, then camp is certainly problematic as it thrives on conservative stereotypes which does not quite reject and, as in my example, can even use them for pleasure. By the seventies, camp seemed to have run its course and was just something of a relic to be used nostalgically. Post Stonewall gay culture will, of course, appropriate camp, but, crucially, in doing so it altered it by erasing some of its most incongruous aspects. Camp simply cannot be the same whether it functions in exchanges between marginalized individuals or within a prouder community. For Daniel Harris (1997), as we shall see, gay culture and camp made for an uneasy relationship: once the need to leave the closet and therefore expressing desire and a political program literally is placed at the center of discourse, camp immediately seemed old fashioned. And politically problematic: when dealing with camp adoration of divas in the 1970s Harris reminds his readers about homophobic comments from Bette Davis. How can we reconcile camp adoration and homophobia?

The politic potential of camp is not without its advocates. A volume edited by Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994) insisted on the political implications of camp and it was indeed used by direct action groups such as Act Up. For Mark Halperin, the Fire Island Italian Widows, a group of gay men who mourn the victims of AIDS in drag, are an excellent example of "political" camp, and he goes to great lengths to try and make both politics and irony compatible. However, as in the case of gay culture, the relationship between politics and camp needs to be qualified. Although as all cultural manifestations camp can be studied seriously, the example provided by Halperin fails both as camp and as mourning. Homosexual camp was precisely about eschewing the earnest concept of homosexuality by achieving a subject position that detached itself from that concept. Crucially, even accepting a political impact of the camp attitudes, the politics of camp are not the politics of gay. If we are to define camp as political, we need to explain how it is political.

How about accepting the fact that culture and individuals operate on different levels? David Halperin acknowledges as much at the start of his book *How To Be Gay* (2012), in which he tells how, in his post Stonewall youth, he looked down on old-style homosexuals that traded camp quips. His essay is, in a way, an attempt to investigate, as Sedgwick suggests in my opening quote, other ways in which campness could be necessary or rewarding, and he makes the important move of recovering homosexual camp for a post Stonewall gay identity: even though it is probably more visible than ever (e.g. *RuPaul's Drag Race*), camp had lost some of its functionality and by then it worked as just one more strand in commercial culture aimed to sell certain things. Camp then became a way of recycling cultural icons and attitudes, displacing it into a commercial dynamics underpinned by the questionable slogan that "trash" is also "art"

Camp reading creates a sense of excess in texts and in the perception of attitudes and behaviors. Such excess goes beyond literal meaning and embraces pleasure, wit, snobbishness and resignation. Whereas the surplus can be reinvested in a recognizably political subjectivity, it does not need to do so. However, even if the result of such excess is not political in a traditional sense, it does have an impact on the way homosexuals position themselves, how they take control of language and discourse and how they find ways to alleviate the consequences of marginalization.

2. Reading Camp: Movies, Showtunes and hot bodies

Besides finding ways to approach the specific political value of camp, a second important area of concern will be distinguishing between camp as an aesthetics of certain things and camp as a point of view that appropriates certain things. The latter is notoriously slippery: Jack Babuscio, a key proponent of relational camp ends up in his article (2004) discussing certain films or auteurs in terms of their content rather than the readings that recreate that content in camp fashion.

Things are not camp. Readings are camp. Camp people are not people who look camp (i.e. camp is not "a look"), but those who can articulate a camp perspective. In the next section I will be discussing traditions that we call camp in terms of subjectivity rather than their actual content or aesthetics, and I will do so largely by following the work of David Halperin (2012) and D.A. Miller (1998) on homosexual subjectivity. This falls within a turn in queer studies that discusses texts in terms of affect: why they have a particular impact on us, why we, homosexuals or gays, find in those texts meanings that heterosexuals do not quite grasp. Of course, Miller and Halperin are not alone in queer studies: Jack Halberstam and Eve Sedgwick have also emphasized the importance subjective responses to texts without necessarily renouncing identity. Camp is precisely the kind of response that lends itself to those analyses. The Broadway musical and certain studio era movies, particularly melodramas, musicals (yet again) and other films focused on larger than life female performers had a substantial following in the two decades before Stonewall. My third example will deal with an aestheticized manifestation of men's erotica in circulation during the same period.

The fact that diva-centered movies and Broadway musicals are still visible into the gay era calls for some qualification when used as "typical" examples of camp engagement. We simply do not know how typical they were before records and chronicles of homosexual culture. Late post-Stonewall gay culture is characterized for turning taste, inclinations or habits into commodities, subject to business dynamics. This could explain the mainstreaming of the word camp as a term almost devoid of queerness. As Andrew Ross (2016) proposed from a contemporary perspective, camp appears like a label to enhance the value of trash through nostalgia. But the kind of discursive

practice I have been discussing here is different: camp expressed an attitude towards culture informed by structures that marginalized homosexuals before marketing fixed such attitude into a label. Movies and musicals were two instances of clusters of texts that became ideal for camp appropriation and they are easily to pin down as products in the post-Stonewall era, but camp was also in (mostly unrecorded) drag shows (as described by Newton) or in the coded comments of homosexuals that communicated knowledge and a perspective to other homosexuals in the age of the closet.

According to Steven Cohan (2005), Daniel Harris (1997) and David Halperin (2012), movie-based camp, particularly focused around the strong personalities of certain actresses can be explained in terms of strategies for survival. These authors make clear that identification with Bette Davis, Joan Crawford or Judy Garland was not, strictly speaking, linked to their femininity. Much criticism of these camp attitudes is informed by post Stonewall resistance to the inversion paradigm. Still, their roles or their personae presented alternatives to hegemonic ideas of masculinity, and homosexuals, much in need of such alternatives, saw the opportunity to engage with those personae. These actresses were featured in genres that tend to prioritize the expression of sentiment. Sentiment may be one of the outcomes of the repression of desire. What Ross does not seem to get is that for homosexual audiences the reason why these films are valuable is not related to their trashiness. Some were trash, some were not. Their value was to provide language and subjective positions that could be embraced beyond the available positions of heterosexual masculinity.

How did camp loving homosexual men experience movies? Some answers can be found in autobiographical writing. Patrick Horrigan's essay *Widescreen Dreams* (1999), for instance, suggests ways in which elements of certain films were singled out by queer spectators. Horrigan discusses his own reactions to *The Sound of Music* (1965), to Barbra Streisand and to *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) in particular and shows how his engagement with the films was closely linked to his life experiences, particularly with the process of growing up into adulthood. Horrigan acknowledges he is not proposing a "gay" canon. Some of his icons are more explicitly queer than others. Still, his reading of popular films is not solipsistic: when developed it relates to attitudes toward film that other homosexuals (not all homosexuals) recognized, rooted as they are in specific hurdles, situations and turning points in homosexual life-stories. His readings are sometimes against the grain, finding meanings that were never intended and would not appear in reviews or "straight" fan discourse. The camp quality of his reflections is not just rooted in his readings, and sometimes his accounts do not lead to a camp conclusion, as they engage with emotional depth alien to camp. But in his discussion of Streisand, for instance, an arch, snobbish voice which is consistently ironic comes across. Horrigan's book suggests that, in the absence of direct representations, homosexuals of a certain generation developed a consistent point of view in experiencing film which went beyond literal meaning. His interpretation of films goes back once and again to issues like family, gender, sexuality, which would not be crucial to other audiences. Horrigan's queerness acts as some kind of gravitational field in which some signifiers related to that queerness become trapped and distorted. And this process of selection and distortion is central to camp: like Humpty Dumpty, that campest creature in the *Alice* books, camp spectators provide verdict on meanings to show who the master is. Camp spectators as Horrigan resist the ordinary meanings of things and find empowerment in making them work within their own marginalized experience.

In *How to Be Gay* (2012), Halperin devotes lengthy discussions to the way Joan Crawford's *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and the Crawford biopic *Mommie Dearest* (1981) are relevant to gay men. His analysis shows the contradictions in camp reading of film. Crawford is not camp. But homosexuals have found in her career resources for camp enjoyment. In a way, homosexual appropriations of Crawford, such as the ones presented in the shows of Lypsincha (as referenced by Halperin), could be understood as simply ironic or mocking. Halperin invites us to think about them differently: the derision and the admiration somehow work together and, in reading responses to Crawford, we see how both can exist simultaneously.

The Crawford myth does not necessarily elicit a camp response. To show this Halperin presents us with two sets of responses to the film *Mommie Dearest* (1981) he collected from the Amazon website on the release of the DVD. The first set testily insists that there is nothing funny about child abuse and mental disease, two prominent signifiers in the film's plot. Laughing at it, treating them lightly, is, therefore, insensitive. The second set of reactions campily relishes the film's excesses. Halperin does acknowledge we do not know whether all participants in the first set were heterosexual or whether the "camp" readings were at all expressed by homosexuals. But his point here is that there is a way of reading that focuses on the literal and seems unable to see the film as anything else than what it is "about", whereas the other way, which uses a camp perspective, focuses on the kinds of aspects, aesthetic and emotional, that might have been enjoyed within the limits of homosexual culture.

This points towards an important feature of camp. These authors and the camp participants in *Mommie Dearest* forums do not read the texts literally. They choose to dismiss real problems such as child abuse to focus on other aspects which are more resonant with their experience as gay men. Gay culture will challenge such perspective. Critics like Daniel Harris (1997) are only engaging with part of the story when they claim that the death of camp in post Stonewall culture is due to the fact that we suddenly realized our icons were homophobic or reactionary. Camp was never about the real people. Camp is about certain fantasies of real people that allow for identification and a recreation of the world. In fact, there is something in the readings which is either related to personal experiences (as in the case of Horrigan) or that takes into account individually positioned readings of the texts, as in the case of Halperin.

Both sets of examples see the texts not as something that is camp but something to be appropriated by a camp audience. In that sense, what is camp is Lypsincha re-enacting one of *Mildred Pierce*'s most famous scenes. The point is precisely to circumvent the more oppressive ideologies present in the texts.

The relationship between the Broadway musical and pre-Stonewall homosexuals is one of those cliches based on a great deal of evidence. It is useful here to remember Halperin's point about homosexual culture being about something else than the tastes of individual homosexuals. Homosexuals like many things, but there are clusters of texts, genres, that certain homosexuals may like as homosexuals, because, as it were, they engage with them by offering points of contact with their own closeted experience. Historically, the Broadway musical is one such genre. D.A. Miller (1998) is the author that has best explored the link between the homosexual subject and the taste for Broadway theatre.

For Miller, the Broadway musical had a special place in the process of acquiring a homosexual subjectivity. He describes how he absorbed Original Cast Recordings in his parents' basement, which is a metaphor of his closet: a hidden place where he could be himself by listening to Ethel Merman. In doing so he did not just listen and sang along to the lyrics, but his body became transformed by the numbers. The Broadway musical was more than just something he experienced as an audience. His essay describes the way *Gypsy* (1962), as other musicals, informed his subjectivity, and helped articulate an engagement with the world: desire, maturity, love, family, narcissism, loneliness, gender. Further, Miller argues that this subjectivity built around musical theatre also had implications in terms of community: the fact that so many pre-Stonewall homosexuals engaged with issues of gender and identity in similar ways established strong generational bonds.

We cannot guarantee that all homosexuals read musicals in that way or that no heterosexual can use the element of the Broadway musical in their process of growing up[2]. Many Broadway musicals, more than *operetta*, turn on identity and de desire to "become what one is". Operetta does have the tunes and the lovers, but the range of depth is narrower. Broadway musicals incorporated two important innovations. One was the emphasis on colorful characterization inherited from vaudeville and other forms of popular theatre. Another was an emphasis on theatricality. Some operettas are stage-themed, but many musicals in the canon are really about performance: *Show Boat* (1951), *Kiss Me Kate* (1953), *Gypsy* (1962), *Funny Girl* (1968), *Cabaret* (1972), *La Cage aux folles* (1986), to name just a few examples, star performers and turn around performance. That creates the right conditions for a camp reading. We somehow know that the ideas on gender and identity in the shows are clichéd, but we are drawn by their theatrical presentation and engage campily with their excesses. Somehow these musicals are not about real men and women, but about people who perform gender.

Gender in the musical ends up being a performance as well. This appeals to audiences. So, the song "I Enjoy Being A Girl" could be read literally, but gay men could also see a little bit more than what the lyrics implied. It was a strong woman, it was in a way provocative: Linda Low, the character, is breaking the rules of conservative Chinese American society. Character, lyrics and performance come together to suggest that Linda Low could indeed engage with certain members of the audience. As I proposed at the start of this chapter, the song itself is not camp, it is what we do about it. *Gypsy* (1962) also has been re-read campily not just by performers, or in Miller's account, but also by other authors. The musical *Ruthless*, with lyrics and *libretto* by Joel Paley, for instance, presents the story of a child star and merges a camp reading of *Gypsy* with a camp reading of *All About Eve* (1950) and other classics of the camp repertoire. *Gypsy* in itself may not be camp, although there is a camp potential present in the authorship of homosexual men, but *Ruthless* is a camp re-writing of *Gypsy.*

My third example has to do with desire rather than identity. But it is also linked to certain experience of homosexual desire. On the one hand desire was nothing to laugh about. It subjugates us, it makes us vulnerable, it drives us to take risks that we might not take for other reasons: desire is both inside us and outside us, and in most cases it is undeniable. On the other hand, the kinds of things desire led homosexuals to do (seeking sex) were in many cases dangerous activities. It forced homosexuals to go public, and the possibilities of being caught increased. In many narratives, homosexual desire appeared as naturally doomed, leading to violence or death. Representations of hot bodies somehow reflected the threat they represented in real life: the hustler was attractive, but he could also attack customers or he could turn out to be a decoy and thus send homosexual into a tailspin.

Given these mythologies, certain instances of 1960s homosexual erotica, for instance the images of the Athletic Model Guild (AMG), have a fascinating camp component. The company was funded by Bob Mizer in 1945 and started out discreetly as a mail order provider of photographs of semi-naked men, later collected in magazines. In the early years, posing straps were necessary, but as the 1960s progressed full frontal nudity became more frequent. In the late 1950s, Mizner also branched out into short films.

The seriousness of desire, the high stakes involved, is transformed into *vignettes* that represent healthy athletic bodies who also represent boyhood fantasies. Images from westerns, or a comic book version of westerns were frequent in the AMG catalogue. And, of course, the classical themes, particularly romans and slaves were the subjects of many of these images. The pictures' *mise en scène* is theatrical, something emphasized by the sparseness and cheapness of the props. The very artificiality of the compositions points towards irony. And even if the hot body is primarily

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[2] Recent accounts have uncovered stories of female, lesbian or straight, empowerment through readings of the Broadway musical. It attests to the genre's power, but the paths of this empowerment are different, they have different narratives and should be studied separately.

consumed for its potential for sexual arousal, the effect of many of these images is humorous. When surveying camp cultures in the 1960s for her project on drag performers, Esther Newton was shocked at the way camp men could laugh at "horrifying" things. This led her to explore the concept of incongruity as central to the camp perspective. We could propose the light treatment of dangerous bodies is another representation of such camp attitudes: the most serious and desirable things are recuperated through theatricality and irony without quite losing their fascination. The two aspects, naïve fantasy and sexual fantasy should work against each other, and they would. Unless one read them from a camp perspective.

So far, we have looked into how a camp perspective is articulated. But what is the impact of camp? Certainly, the instances selected here, like the ones listed by Babuscio (2004) and others, thrive on oppressive images and stereotypes. The hot body, the suffering woman, the assertion of gender clichés, all have dark counterparts in real life. Unsurprisingly, an explicitly political agenda dismissed them as things of the past that were not necessary to the lives of gay man. But I have also shown how, through humour or critical detachment, these are recuperated. No matter how seductive the notion of a hot body is, how much we invest in desiring a certain kind of man, the fact is that they work best as fantasies. And camp wit can, for those who can exercise it, help achieve some distance from one's own dangerous desires. The same could be said from my other two examples: the excesses of sentimentality, the playful identities of the Broadway musicals and diva-centered movies can still help to engage performatively with stereotypical ideologies and the pressure to conform. Gay identity and post-Stonewall gay politics encouraged homosexuals to stand up proud and challenge pressures. But this will not work for everybody. For many of us, there is still camp. And if that helps create a shared sense of community and structures for resistance against the traps of language, then maybe "political" is the best word for this attitude. Yes, it is not political in the sense promoted by the gay movement and often will run against the kind of doctrines generated by traditional liberation politics. And this is probably what still seems transgressive about homosexual camp: even after liberation and identity, camp attitudes can manage the world and its doctrines, even the doctrine of liberation, in individual, subjective ways.

At a time when the engaged response for anything that seems to us politically incorrect is cancellation, we might have something to learn from the lessons of camp responses. What camp does better than righteous anger is turning very serious issues into a fantasy version where the seriousness is relieved through humour and resilience.

3. Notes towards a Spanish camp

So far, I have tried to describe the tension between a homosexual subject and reality in a heterosexual society: it's about perspective, wit, theatricality and gender. It is also a process of subjectivity that feeds on culture and a process or re-reading that culture in homosexual terms. To what extent is homosexual camp defined in this way present in other cultures? More specifically: is camp a central attitude to Spanish homosexual culture? And if it is, why is it so difficult to conceptualize?

This last section turns around camp's translatabilty. In his account of "gay culture", Halperin (2012) raises the question of whether the repertoire of texts relevant to such culture are shared internationally. His tentative answer is that they may, but more study is needed to account for similarities. If homosexual camp is the result of certain characterization of same-sex desire as marginal, cultures that share that characterization are likely to have something similar to the responses I have described in previous sections.

"Certain characterization" is, indeed, a slippery concept to build up a solid argument. On a very general level, the way male homosexuality is conceptualized is very similar across the Western world: we can find elements of stigma, pathologization, legal repression, inversion, identity, etc. even beyond the West. But Anglo-American culture has successfully constructed a narrative around homosexuality and gay liberation that ended up being adopted by other cultures. There had been attempts at some kind of homosexual movement since the late XIX Century, and then in Germany in the 1910s, but they did not achieve internationalization. The "gay" paradigm that determines our reading of homosexual history was basically produced in the US and in the UK. If the narrative built around homosexual camp only became possible from a gay perspective, we need to entertain the idea that camp as described might be an effect of narratives about homosexual culture that are tied up to a US experience.

Frank Browning, in *A Queer Geography* (1998), goes as far as to argue that "gay" is an American invention that just does not work very well in other places. This would explain that some of the references discussed in this article are recognized in other cultures, but, at the same time, also the fact that they lose something in translation. To put it in Halperin's terms: the connotations of Joan Crawford, what she meant for homosexuals, work differently in the US than in Spain, and therefore one needs to be acquainted with American culture to read them as gay along the lines proposed by Halperin. This is the case of many other camp references mentioned in these pages. My opening example relies on linguistic and cultural competence, as *Flower Drum Song* was not very popular in Spain, and the dynamics it presents are less familiar. Davis, Garland, Athletic Model Guild and even some Broadway musicals are known in Spain, but depleted of their original context. Asking about Spanish camp perspective requires awareness of these gaps between Spanish perceptions and American ones: we cannot assume the texts appropriated as camp in the US will keep their potential in a different culture. Even the Athletic Model Guild, for instance, constructs its fantasies around certain very American mythologies. "Blond", for instance, does not mean the same in Spain than it does in the

Midwest (in the Midwest it might be "the boy next door"; in Spain "blond" connotes "foreigner"); and the imagery of the Old West has entirely different connotations. If fantasies and subjectivities are historically and geographically situated, one should expect camp to be as well.

Indeed, this is rooted in a more general issue of translatability regarding gay culture: finding equivalents to Anglo categories of queer experience has proved somewhat unsatisfactory. Spanish culture always seems to import words in English or just literal translations that end up lexicalized. The integration of such words in Spanish tends to be awkward as they often lack the implications they have in the original. If we push Browning's premises, the reasons for the resistance to words like pride, closet or camp in Spanish culture might be explained. "Gay" is, no matter how precise we choose to be on its Provençal etymology, an import from English. Brad Epps pointed this out in the case of queer: once we start using it in Spanish we lose the lived implications of being the victims of a slur or dismissed by our association to it. I have pointed it out in the case of "armario" as a translation for closet. Yes, a closet is an "armario", but the word closet to refer to some kind of shameful secret preceded its gay meaning in English in ways that it did not in Spanish. Like closet, camp presents the problem of a relationship between experience and content which is historically and culturally motivated.

Still, there were ways to get around the issues of translation with queer or closet. Insofar as closet is a way of living one's queerness, it was part of the experience of Spanish homosexuals. Maybe it is the same with camp. Camp is, as we shall see, can be understood as a trait of Spanish homosexual cultures that maybe has not been wholly lexicalized. The lack of lexicalization is a different issue to the lack of existence. Camp is, on the other hand, harder to pin down conceptually than "closet" or "queer". It does say something elusive about certain configuration of homosexual subjectivity. And it is a configuration that, with few exceptions, as we have seen, has probably not been fully explored in Spanish homosexual cultures. This suggests more work on specifically Spanish homosexual subject positions is needed before we can decide on the centrality of camp in Spanish culture. Were there distinct elements in the process of subjectivity for Spanish homosexuals?

"What is camp exactly?" was, indeed, one of the most often formulated questions in my talks during the 2000's when I was discussing my work on gay culture with Spanish. Having been immersed in Anglo traditions at the time, I failed to see the difficulties my audience was experiencing in following my examples. It seemed to me that they were assuming that camp was in the content of things, and that what they wanted was a formula for recognizing it whereas I was not giving them the formula for recognition but an account of certain mechanisms: camp is based not on signifiers but on the whole signification process. In English, camp came naturally for me. And I could recognize instances of camp in Spanish. But somehow the explanation of how camp was constructed did not convince my audience. Let us look at the alternatives for linguistic equivalence available to them.

The Spanish RAE dictionary defined camp as "que recrea con desenfado formas estéticas pasadas de moda" (a lighthearted recreation of old-fashioned styles). The Spanish comic book TBO in the 1970s had a section named "Camp humour", which was apparently based on that definition. By implication, it was understood that camp was something aesthetically similar to kitsch or, even more specifically, to the Spanish word "cursi". Formally, indeed, many "cursi" and "kitsch" artifacts looked like camp. But they did not exhaust the implications of the word, particularly in defining a point of view. "Cursi", in particular, refers to a certain sensibility in an individual. Yet, the term emphatically does two things. First, "cursi" is intended as a clearly pejorative term (to say someone's taste is cursi is not a compliment); and second, the elements of effeminacy are very prominent, as it is applied to either women with old fashioned taste or men who are not very masculine. "Cursi" is not somebody who plays with the incongruity between two systems of appreciation. There is no wit in bridging the gap. Cursi is something just said of somebody, thus losing the element of recreation of reality in one's own terms central to all definitions of homosexual camp. In fact, all reference to homosexual perspectives is completely lost in the cluster of concepts that could more plausibly be linked to the English word camp.

Maybe the best definition in Spanish comes from poet Jaime Gil de Biedma. In a 1978 interview on the poetic generation of 1927 for a volume on gay culture, *El homosexual ante la Sociedad enferma*, Gil de Biedma proposes:

> In English homosexual jargon, camp meant and means exactly the same as "pluma" in Spanish jargon.... Camp is the deliberate treatment by the author of the reference and thematic elements of his work (...) as mere categories of formal order, as a literary genre, as style clauses in which the author only participates ironically, making the reader nod at the surplus meaning. If readers do not catch the intentionality, if they don't become accomplices, (…) they won't understand or enjoy anything. On the other hand, the reader or viewer can play the game on their own and turn something that wasn't camp into camp. Neither Judy Garland nor Concha Piquer nor Estrellita Castro were, or at least they didn't pretend to be camp. What is camp is the appreciation we now make of them and their songs. (Gil de Biedma, 1978, p. 196)

"Pluma", which translates as "feather", is the word used to decry signs of effeminacy in men (in the 1990s it extended its range to refer to signs of masculinity in women). Although it has been used to demean homosexuals, it is also a word used by homosexuals to signal they can perceive homosexuality in another person, even if this has not been explicitly expressed in the first person. The centrality of "effeminacy" in Spanish thinking about "pluma" sets a certain distance towards the elements that made up Anglo camp. "Pluma" has clear homosexual implications in

Spanish, so Gil de Biedma is bringing these into his reading of the concept. On the other hand it is hard to understand in this fragment how camp works. Pluma implies traits, gestures, whereas this definition sees camp as relational: it is in the eye of the beholder. The gap between a "sensibility" and an "aesthetic" pulls this definition into two directions which do not complement each other. It is true that neither Judy Garland or Estrellita Castro were camp, but Gil de Biedma does not specify that the appreciation of Garland and Castro was particularly expressed from positions that would be labelled "homosexual".

So, in terms of the way it is perceived, "pluma" works in a way which is different to campness. Pluma can be studied and careful, and certainly many pre-liberation homosexuals in Spain worked hard at expressing pluma in an elegant way. However, in the main, pluma is more noticed and decoded by others than coded by the subject.

Homosexual camp's coding worked both ways. It required not just an imitation of a certain repertoire of gestures, which mixed elements from the upper classes with hints of effeminacy and snobbishness. It also required linguistic wit, wordplay, a playful intention. Images of homosexuals under Francoism have reached us in a more limited palette of colors than their US or UK equivalents. Fear to be noticed was important, the Mediterranean focus on expression of virility is probably more central than in the north, and, crucially, a text-based articulation of homosexuality in Spain was less prevalent than in Anglo countries. Spanish culture might be more hostile to snob quips than Anglo cultures. We can explain this in many ways, we could even say that such "cultivated", "intertextual" or even "intellectual" expression of homosexuality was restricted to the upper classes, whereas the lower classes did not have either icons or camp. A great majority of the names in Core's camp repertoire (1984) belong to the upper classes, particularly around the Edwardian era. Spanish culture somehow had less time or patience to these inheritors of dandyism. Although the Spanish approximations to the meaning of camp do convey some of the aspects of it, there is no single term that accounts completely for the implications of the word in English. Homosexual irony exists, but it is important to think about it specifically. This brings us to the issue of the camp catalogue. Even if one argues that there is a wit associated to homosexual positioning in Spain, the texts that provide the basis for the expression of that wit need to be different.

Many of the examples favored by Philip Core (1984) are not well known or are too far removed from Spanish experience (for example, the class system in Britain provides a different set of attitudes to the class system in Spain). On the other hand, the larger areas described above have echoes in Spanish cultures. There is, clearly, a cinephile Spanish camp, which seems to be rooted in Spanish homosexual cultures, in very similar ways as it was in US culture. It is evident, for instance, in the work of Terenci Moix, particularly his autobiography, *El peso de la paja* (1998), in which he enacts readings very close to the ones described in Horrigan's book. Eduardo Mendicutti has also used film icons to communicate a queer perspective, for instance in *Mae West y yo* (2011). Still, two points are worth making. First, that the films that inspire Spanish homosexual subjectivities tend to be made in Hollywood (Mae West for Mendicutti, Bette Davis for Moix). Camp arising from Spanish film is far more limited. There are some Cifesa epics that have had a limited camp following (particularly when starring Aurora Bautista) and there is of course the huge camp icon Sara Montiel, but otherwise most of the references are from other cultures. Crawford, for instance, does not seem to have been absorbed in camp Spanish cultures as much as Bette Davis. Second, the campy cinephilia in Spain has a fainter association to homosexuality as the discourse has been elaborated less consistently.

What is undeniable is that there is evidence that the camp strand existed in homosexual cultures and had similar contours as the equivalent in Anglo cultures. Although the golden era for camp was between the 1890s and the end of the 1920s, the US and the UK kept on building up an underground camp culture based on the traditions created during the Golden Age. Spain (and Germany) did not. Spanish homosexual camp may have thrived in the 1920s to the extent any cultural attitude could thrive in a country with high levels of illiteracy, but the blow of Francoism and the repression of the national catholic decades put a stop to that. There is here a clear parallelism with the case of Germany: it had a rich sexual subculture by 1930 which was obliterated by Nazism and the war. What we know about figures like Álvaro de Retana (Villena, 1999; Mira, 2004) are almost point by point equivalent to others in UK show business. Jaime Gil de Biedma encouraged us to read the Generación del 27 as camp discourse, but largely, camp does not seem very visible in Spanish homosexual cultures before 1980s.

Homosexual camp becomes more visible by the end of Francoism, particularly in the Mediterranean regions. The Catalan underground filmmakers Les 5 QKs provide evidence that the discourse was very much alive and very close to what has been called camp in British and American discourse. Lluís Fernández's novel *The Naked Anarchist* (1977) uses a very pointed camp discourse to portray a group of Valencian homosexuals. Drag cultures, again particularly in Valencia, were complex from the mid seventies. They were based on imitation of stars, especially Sara Montiel. La Margot (Toni Campos) was the most important Montiel impersonator in those years. Drag performers did imitate stars like Liza Minnelli, but in the main their references were Spanish copla stars. This approach to popular song during Francoism does encourage the same camp reactions as the Broadway musical did in the US. Many of the copla female artists became homosexual icons: Lola Flores and Rocío Jurado in particular had a homosexual following, although, again, the way this following materialized textually is less consistent than in the case of the Broadway musical. Unfortunately, whereas the Broadway appropriations have been kept alive by US homosexuals, the culture around copla is disappearing fast from Spanish culture.

On the other hand, some homosexual attitudes towards religious discourse seem to be exactly what camp was all about: incongruent, theatrical, humorous. The artwork of Nazario in the late 1970s and early 1980s does attest that a certain camp way to look at religion was very much in the air. There is less evidence that this became a widespread

phenomenon. Nazario also represents well the merging of humour, sex and theatricality that was so central to camp practice elsewhere. Such camp approach to religious manifestations is evident in Andalusian culture. Once again, we would need more actual examples of such articulation.

Answering the question of centrality of camp discourse in cultures where it has not been studied in close attention might be something of an aporia. As discussed in the first section, linking the concept of camp to actual attitudes and practices entailed also research into their presence in real situations. This is the kind of groundwork Esther Newton did in the 1960s, locating camp in very specific conditions. In Anglo American scholarship the concept has subsequently been consolidated through an exchange between the deductive and the inductive approaches, between the aesthetic and the subjective. Although the formulation on the dynamics of homosexual camp thus elaborated can be applied to certain manifestations of Spanish culture, in order to confirm how central camp was to those cultures in Spain needs further research into a wide range of manifestations. This research goes beyond a political view of the movement or a story or legal repression: it needs to identify and somehow articulate narratives about Spanish homosexual cultures. It concerns the way homosexuals communicated with each other through irony and wit, how they kept an ambivalent perspective on their marginalized position and, in the end, how awareness of marginalization was turned into camp discourse. Some scholars, like Carlos Barea and Juan Barba, are now excavating Spanish camp cultures. The volume *La devoción inflamada*, an anthology of visual and textual pieces that gesture towards camp is an important attempt to put this tradition into writing. In the end, embracing camp is embracing modes of homosexual subjectivity which are hard to pin down but which, at the same time, can provide very real insights into same-sex desire circulated in culture.

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