Notes on Queer

Contemplations on Susan Sontag’s Notes on "Camp" in relation to queer representation at the 2019 Met Gala

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In-between these chronological milestones camp has been declared dead, then resurrected, woven into mainstream media, but most importantly, conceptualized as a timeless, pastel pink tone on the rainbow of queer aesthetics (Wolf, 2013, pp. 287-294). Camp is both simple and very complex. Its simplicity may lie in its production, yet its complexity is marked by its interpretation. As Sontag indicates rather wisely, despite of the artificial nature of camp (pun intended), its extravagant naivété manifests in treating life as theater (or cabaret, I would dare to argue)( Sontag, 1964, p. 4, para. 11, & p. 5, para. 11). That is "theater", confined by quotation marks, but liberated by time from moral relevance (Sontag, 1964, p. 4, para. 10). It was considered as the "modern dandyism" then, but what about today, in the contemporary (p. 11, para. 45)?

Undeniably, the Met Gala is of crucial importance in the social world of high fashion, mainstream media, and solid business capital. A ticket last year ranged at 30.000 USD, while having your own table at the event costed approximately 275.000 USD. On the other hand, the highly priced access also means a large sum in donations that came to $12 million being raised in 2018. That amount went entirely to the funds of the Costume Institute, the only curatorial department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that has to fund itself. (Friedman, 2019)

In spite of the ironic self-consciousness that both designers and stylists had to practice in order to make camp 'happen' at the Met Gala - which is completely opposed to what camp is actually about - there was one quality that probably made this wild capitalist, elite show-off worthy of remembering. For the first time in history an event of this caliber had been attended by renowned American drag queens (Levesley, 2019). From the *Drag Race* (Visage, & Polly, 2009-present) royalty there was Aquaria wearing Maison Margiela by John Galiano, followed by the man behind the brand, RuPaul himself (exchanging his iconic drag look for a rather
discreet design by Zaldy), and the winner of the seventh season of the show, Violet Chachki dressed in Moschino by Jeremy Scott (Levesley, 2019)(Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image1)

Of equal importance, but less broadcasted was Big Freedia glammed in Gypsy Sport by Rio Uribe (Hahn, 2019)(Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image2)
As John M. Wolf observes, the audience is crucial in the camp experience, however, it is not solely defined by its perception (Wolf, 2013, p. 285). "It's not all in the eye of the beholder" (Sontag, 1964, p. 2, para. 3.). These statements translate rather ambivalent if we think about the setting of the Met Gala where guests were purposefully asked to express their personal definition of camp by enacting aspects, references and moments of this cultural genre. A culture, that relates mostly to a self-identified minority: the LGBTQAI+, or more academically apt, the queer community (Wolf, 2013, p. 287). A minority, that without any specific territorial origin; united ethnic, religious or national background has had to find other paths to claim its communal identity. Camp, as a subcultural structure, had therefore become integral part of enforcing a sense of oneness through a shared sensibility (Wolf, 2013, p. 287).

However, apart from the fun and glamorous features that camp seemingly entails, it also acted as a political statement in the 20th century, up until the 1990s when according to several critics and authors, including Daniel Harris, have announced the decreased popularity of camp, due to its lost utility in queer activism. This major acknowledgement was accounted for the social and political shifts of the Western world - primarily originated from the United States and claimed by the AIDS epidemic and the rising support of right-wing governance - requiring more direct methods to fight LGBTQAI+ oppression. Harris also debates that because of the growing integration of queer visibility in the mainstream culture industry (a philosophical term coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer [1944/1972]), the camp rhetoric known for its performative exaggeration had become less sought after, and therefore, scarcely represented. (Harris, as cited in Wolf, 2013, p. 287)

It is important to note here though, that camp does not necessarily align with queer taste by any means, however according to Newton, it has a clear connection to drag culture, where humour, theatricality and incongruity are the core elements of the diva-like female impersonations (Newton, as cited in Wolf, 2013, p. 286). The perfectly subtle concoction of admiration and mockery is the essence of appreciating the camp aesthetic, the philosophy of it being, 'bad to the point that it becomes perversely good' (Sontag, 1964, p. 7, para. 26).

While the authenticity of camp was already a lost case from the beginning of the Met Gala this year, after all, the saving grace was its service as a night for an important landmark of queer history. And that on its own, dragqueens gliding across the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in excessive high fashion pieces, might have a chance to be considered camp in twenty
years or so. For Lady Gaga has stated in her behind-the-scenes Vogue reportage, "...camp becomes camp overtime" (Vogue, 2019).

**Bibliography:**


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