

# CAMP

BY PHILIP ALVARÉ

*No. 3. Not only is there a camp vision, a camp way of looking at things. Camp is as well a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons. There are “campy” movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings ... True, the camp eye has the power to transform experience.*  
Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp”

In the last issue I promised we’d all go to “camp,” and I’m not talking about pup tents and weenie roasts. While researching this story I felt I’d been away, though not to a North Country lake. This camp is a place where we can experience things that give us a new lens on life, but not in the way a summer in the Catskills or Adirondacks might. Being aware of, and experiencing, camp is about developing a sensibility, an eye for exaggeration and exuberant failure. If, for example, on a perfect summer afternoon, while picnicking on the banks of a lake, we look up and see Esther Williams cruising by, waving from the top of a quadruple-decker, human-pyramid, water-skiing act as the Duchess of Idaho, we know: This is camp. The word is derived from the French slang term *se camper*, which means to pose in an exaggerated fashion. In other words, it’s about being over the top (OTT). Way OTT!

The late Susan Sontag was one of the first to codify the concept of camp when she collected her essays in a book titled “Against Interpretation” that contained “Notes on Camp.” She writes, “No. 58. The ultimate camp statement: It’s good because it’s awful.” Indeed,

camp fails at being serious, because it is exaggerated and exuberant and often ridiculous. It’s either not quite art, or it fails at being serious art.

In a recent article in The New York Review of Books, “Notes on Susan” (a fairly campy title), Eliot Weinberger refers to what is undoubtedly one of Sontag’s most famous essays: “It has dated badly, especially the word ‘camp’ (let alone ‘to camp’), [which] has long since reverted to its summer leisure connotations, and its subtleties, so meticulously detailed by Sontag, have been reduced to the ‘Cult’ section of the video store.” Not in my neck of the woods, Mr. Weinberger! It’s also interesting to note that “Against Interpretation” has never gone out of print — not exactly what I’d call “dated badly.”

Perhaps Weinberger does not own a television. One would be hard-pressed not to have heard of “American Idol,” for example, which seems, without a doubt, camp. Or perhaps the thousands of hours of programming about Anna Nicole Smith, or Paris Hilton, have escaped this critic’s notice. We needn’t specify a particular program or show-biz personality, because the lion’s share (and that would probably be the MGM lion) of television, movies, and perhaps the entire entertainment industry, is total camp.

In an afterward for “Against Interpretation” called “Thirty Years Later,” Sontag laments “the ascendancy of a culture whose most intelligible, persuasive values are drawn from the entertainment industries.” There’s a sad irony in this when considering

her long relationship with photographer Annie Leibovitz, who became famous in her own right by photographing entertainment celebrities, as well as the rich and famous. Sontag observed that “A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about ...” For this reason, she chose the form of jottings or “notes,” rather than essays; notes seemed a more appropriate way to record camp sensibility. There are 53 numbered notes, or points, made in the essay, which Weinberger refers to as “analytic overkill on a minor pop phenomenon - an ironic fad among certain witty gay men.” If it’s a fad, it’s lasted over half a century, since Christopher Isherwood first mentioned it in his 1954 book “The World in the Evening.” I can’t think of anyone — “certain witty gay men” or otherwise — who isn’t amused, if not bewitched, by camp.

This is not the time to wade through all 53 notes that Sontag left us about camp, which while thorough, do not exhaust the subject. To simplify matters, I turned to a friend named Dini Lamot (a k a drag performer

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Musty Chiffon) to help navigate this elusive sensibility we recognize as camp when we see it, but which seems to slip away when we try to describe it. Lamot and his partner Windle Davis own and operate The Inn at Hudson, an exuberantly designed Dutch Jacobean mansion. They have an exotic plant collection for their conservatory that would have fit in nicely on the set of “Suddenly Last Summer.” Both are former members of the New Wave, cross-dressing 1980s band Human Sexual Response (whose best-known song announced “I want to be Jackie Onassis”). Lamot’s brother, Larry Bangor, another Human Sexual Response member, participated in our discussion. But it is to Musty Chiffon I owe my greatest debt of gratitude (“I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers.”)

Musty agreed to help me bushwhack along the trail through Campy Land, as a guide or camp counselor. I like to think of this territory as a game board (see below) that depicts a mountain (think Mt. Olympus and shorty tunics), with a path rising in ever-narrowing helical rings to a craggy, vertiginous summit. It’s sort of like Dante’s “Inferno” in reverse. I think of Musty as Beatrice to my Dante. To enter the realm of camp is to be on a kind of pilgrimage. At the top, camp icons greet the acolyte with open arms. No, that’s not right. They swan up with cigarettes in long holders, martinis, gimp lanyards, and riding crops. Bette Davis is there, so are Joan Crawford, Carmen Miranda, Mae West, Tallulah Bankhead, Tab Hunter, William Holden, and of course Esther — just to name a few. So “fasten your seatbelts, it’s going to be a bumpy night.”

Musty sees the first camp action as God creating the world. “He certainly knew better but couldn’t help himself,” he says. “I became aware of camp about 6,000 years later, when Tiny Tim appeared on the ‘Tonight Show.’”

I ask if individuals can be camp and am told, “Only through public presentation can an individual achieve camp: Anna Nicole Smith, for example.”

I wonder what Musty thinks of Hollywood, and movies in general. “Russ Meyer’s movies were camp. John Waters is camp. Divine was ultimate camp. Bella Lugosi was camp. ‘Whatever Happened to Baby Jane’ is camp. The city of Hollywood is campy in every aspect, at every time of day, and from every angle.”

I also wonder about decor and decoration, in particular the sets for “Sunset Boulevard.” Gloria Swanson and Bill Holden wait for the New Year’s ball to drop. Max von Sydow toadies around a room awash in Spanish Baroque excesses. “I’m ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille,” announces Gloria’s Norma Desmond.

“Cat clocks and most everything about kitchens from the ‘50s are campy,” Musty volunteers. Is there a way to bring more camp into our lives? What about camping it up, how’s that done?

“Camping it up,” explains Musty, “is when you successfully whip a tablecloth out from under a place setting for 20, then wrap it around yourself as a headdress and sing ‘God Bless America.’ Do you know what I mean?”

Does Ms. Chiffon have advice, or a particular set of instructions, on how to lead a campy life? “Move into a trailer park, start a collection of porcelain nuns, and study to be a mime,” comes the recommendation.

Finally, Musty cites the same Eliot Weinberger article noted at the beginning of this piece. “I think he’s wrong,” says Musty. “As long as one person makes a mistake, someone else will think it’s genius.” Great minds

think alike (I thought). “I *am* big, it’s the pictures that got small,” as Norma declared in “Sunset Boulevard.”

Ultimately we have to wonder why camp sensibility has burst the seams of the “ironic fad among certain witty gay men” that Weinberger referred to, and become a part of contemporary aesthetics. It’s a mystery, and as Sontag wrote, “It’s embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp. One runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp.”

So on that note, I will bid adieu, believing I just may have become what I set out to describe. ❖



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