

## IT'S BEING SO CAMP AS KEEPS US GOING

Arguments have lasted all night about what camp really is and what it means.<sup>1</sup> There are two different interpretations which connect at certain points: camping about, mincing and screaming; and a certain taste in art and entertainment, a certain sensibility.

Camping about has a lot to be said for it. First of all and above all, it's very us. It is a distinctive way of behaving and of relating to each other that we have evolved. To have a good camp together gives you a tremendous sense of identification and belonging. It is just about the only style, language and culture that is distinctively and unambiguously gay male. One of our greatest problems is that we are cut adrift for most of the time in a world drenched in straightness. All the images and words of the society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality. Camp is one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man.

Then again camp is fun. It's quite easy to pick up the lingo and get into the style, and it makes even quite dull people witty. Fun and wit are their own justification, but camp fun has other merits too. It's a form of self-defence. Particularly in the past, the fact that gay men could so sharply and brightly make fun of themselves meant that the real awfulness of their situation could be kept at bay – they need not take things too seriously, need not let it get them down. Camp kept, and keeps, a lot of gay men going.

And camp is not masculine. By definition, camping about is not butch. So camp is a way of being human, witty and vital, without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role. You've only got to think of the impact of Quentin Crisp's high camp (as charted in *The Naked Civil Servant*<sup>2</sup>) on the straight world he came up against, to see that camp has a radical/progressive potential: scaring muggers who know that all this butch male bit is not really them but who feel they have to act as if it is (Quentin showed that he knew they were screamers underneath it all); running rings of logic and wit round the pedestrian ideas of psychiatrists, magistrates and the rest; and developing by living out a high camp life-style a serenity and a sense of being-at-one-with-yourself ('I am one of the stately homos of Britain').

Identity and togetherness, fun and wit, self-protection and thorns in the flesh of straight society – these are the pluses of camp. Unfortunately there are also minuses, and they are precisely the opposite side of those positive features.

The togetherness you get from camping about is fine, but not everybody actually feels able to camp about. A bunch of queens screaming together can be very exclusive for someone who isn't a queen or feels unable to camp. The very tight togetherness that makes it so good to be one of the queens is just the thing that makes a lot of other gay men feel left out. One of the sadder features of the gay movement is the down so many activists have on queens and camp, on the only heritage we've got. But it can work the other way around too: some queens despise the straight-looking (or otherwise non-queenly) gays around them, as if camping about is the only way of being gay. You have to let people be gay in the way that's best for them.

The fun, the wit, has its drawbacks too. It tends to lead to an attitude that you can't take anything seriously, everything has to be turned into a witticism or a joke. Camp finds CHE<sup>3</sup> too dull, GLF<sup>4</sup> too political, all the movement activities just not fun enough. It's a fair point, up to a point – CHE and GLF can be a bit glum and a bit heavy. But actually they've got quite a serious job to do. Life is not a bed of roses for gay men, still; sexism and our own male chauvinism are hard to understand, come to terms with, change. That does not always lend itself to fun and wit, but it needs to be done all the same.

Again, the self-mockery of self-protection can have a corrosive effect on us. We can keep mocking ourselves to the point where we really do think we're a rather pathetic, inferior lot. Phrases like 'silly Nelly', 'Chance'd be a fine thing' and 'It's too much for a white woman',<sup>5</sup> funny though they are, have a lot that is self-hating about them – behind them linger such ideas as 'How stupid I am', 'I'm too wretched and ugly to attract anyone', 'I'm too sexually hung-up to be able to give myself physically'. . . . Camp can help us from letting the social, cultural situation of gays getting us down: but it is the situation that's wrong, not ourselves. Camp sometimes stops us seeing that.

Camping about then is good and bad, progressive and reactionary. Often it's very hard to disentangle these two aspects. For instance, I am very much in the habit of calling men 'she': a man with a large cock is 'a big girl'; to a man showing off, I'll say 'Get her!'; I welcome friends with 'It's Miss Jones' (or whatever the man's name is). In one way, this is a good habit. After all, I'm glad to be gay and I prefer straight women (i.e. most women) to straight men (i.e. most men). Calling gay men 'she' means I don't think of them, or myself, as straight men (with all that that implies). But given the actual situation of women in society, and given that however hard I try, there's still plenty of male chauvinism about me, there is something rather suspect

about this habit. Isn't it tantamount to saying gay men are inferior to straight men, just as women are? Isn't it really a put-down of gay men, and of women? It's hard to decide, and in the end I think I'll go on doing it because I'd rather gay men identified with straight women than with straight men, since most of the values associated with masculinity in this society (aggressiveness, competitiveness, being 'above' tenderness and emotion) I reject. Yet the whole practice, like so much of camp, is deeply ambiguous. So much depends on what you feel about men and women, about sex, about being gay.

The context of camp is important too. Camp means a lot at a gathering of queers, or used defiantly by queers against straightness: but it is very easily taken up by straight society and used against us. We know two things about camp that straights, at any rate as the media and everyday jokes show it, don't: that it is nice to be a queen (can be, should be), and that not all queers are queens. The straight media have taken up the queen image, which we have created, but use it against us. To a limited extent, they appreciate the wit, but they don't see why it was necessary. They pick up the undertow of self-oppression without ever latching on to the elements of criticism and defiance of straightness. And they just never seem to realise that camping is only one way of being gay. Camp queens are the inevitable image of gayness in art and the media. As I see it, this rather catches us in a cleft stick. We should defend camp, whether we're queens or not; at the same time, we've got to make it clear that we are not all camp all the same. That's a rather complicated argument for the straight media. It's also quite a complicated problem for us too – but ultimately I think we should be open about allowing each other to be queens or not as we feel, and should try to build on the anti-butche fun and wit of camp as a way of building gayness into a better society.

What of camp as a kind of taste or sensibility?

It is easy, and usual, to offer a list of camp things at the beginning of discussions of camp, so that we all know what we are talking about. Thus:

Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald  
 Aubrey Beardsley  
 Vienna waltzes  
 most classical ballet  
 Busby Berkeley  
 Marlene Dietrich  
 the Queen Mother  
 Ronald Firbank  
*Pakeezah*  
 velvet and brocade curtains  
 Little Richard and Sylvester

Such lists are, however, a bit misleading, since camp is far more a question of how you respond to things rather than qualities actually inherent in those things. It's perfectly possible to take MacDonald and Eddy seriously as lovers in musicals, or the Queen Mother as an embodiment of Britannic royalty, or Beardsley as a draughtsman, and so on. Equally, you can find things camp which are, on the face of it, the very antithesis of camp: John Wayne, for instance, or Wagner. It's all a question of how you look at it.

How then to define the camp way of looking at things? Basically, it is a way of prising the form of something away from its content, of revelling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial. If you really believed in the emotions and stories of classical ballet, in the rightness and value of royalty, in the properness of supervirility and fascism, then you could not find *The Sleeping Beauty*, the Queen Mother, or John Wayne camp. What I value about camp is that it is precisely a weapon against the mystique surrounding art, royalty and masculinity: it cocks an irresistible snook, it demystifies by playing up the artifice by means of which such things as these retain their hold on the majority of the population.

It is interesting to speculate about why it is that camp should be the form that male gay culture has taken. Susan Sontag (1967) suggests that camp is the way homosexuals have sought to make some impression on the culture of the society they live in. Mastery of style and wit has been a way of declaiming that queens have something distinctive to offer society. This seems to me to be true. Gay men have made certain 'style professions' very much theirs (at any rate by association, even if not necessarily in terms of the numbers of gays actually employed in these professions): hairdressing, interior decoration, dress design, ballet, musicals, revue. These occupations have made the life of society as a whole more elegant and graceful, and the showbiz end has provided the world at large with many pleasant evenings. At the same time hairdressing, interior decoration and the rest are clearly marked with the camp sensibility: they are style for style's sake, they don't have 'serious' content (a hairstyle is not 'about' anything), they don't have a practical use (they're just nice), and the actual forms taken accentuate artifice, fun and occasionally outrageous – all that chi-chi and tat, those pinks and lace and sequins and tassels, curlicues and 'features' in the hair, satin drapes and chiffon scarves and fussy ornaments, all the paraphernalia of a camp sensibility that has provided gay men with a certain legitimacy in the world.

A certain legitimacy only. The very luxuriousness and 'uselessness' of these professions have also tended to reinforce the image of gay men as decadent, marginal, frivolous – above all, not involved in the real production of wealth (on the shopfloor or in the management offices) in society, just sterile parasites on the edges. And too the association of so much of the camp style professions with women is ambiguous. Although women in our society are involved in production, none the less their social role is seen as being adjuncts to men, not just to provide a man with a wife, servant and mother



*Figure 4.1* The Queen Mother.



*Figure 4.2* Marlene Dietrich.



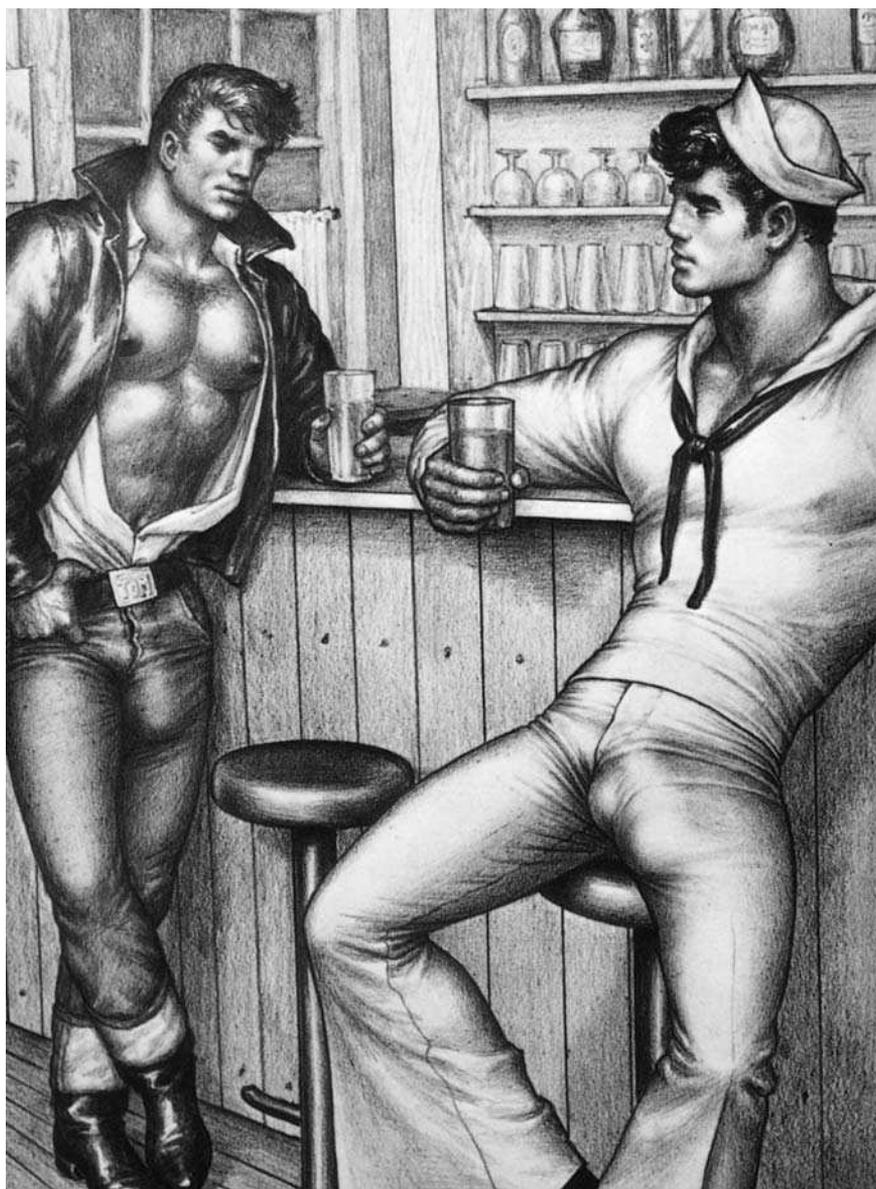
*Figure 4.3* Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald.



*Figure 4.4* Little Richard.



*Figure 4.5* John Wayne.



*Figure 4.6* Two of Tom of Finland's men.

to 'his' kids, but also to display his wealth by her smartness, the frequency of her hair-dos, the number of her frocks. This applies above all to the wealthy of course, where the lady in her Paris fashions displays her husband's buying power and her access (by virtue of his position) to the canons of fashion and good taste. But in less spectacular forms it works further down the social scale. Most husbands expect their wives to 'look nice', to make an effort with their appearance when they take them out. It is only the poorest husband whose wife cannot afford a bouffant hair-do, some fake fur and a glass brooch for Saturday night out. And we gay men have been deeply involved in creating the styles and providing the services for the 'turn-out' of the women of the western world. This gives us legitimacy – but as parasites on women, who are themselves seen as subordinate to men and objects of luxury (however meagre). Moreover, the involvement of camp in objectifying women in this way (reaching its apotheosis in Busby Berkeley's production numbers (though I've never heard that he himself was gay)) makes it something that anyone who cares about everyone's liberation should be wary of.

But that's a digression. Let's get back to the point about camp evolving because gay men have staked out a claim on society at large by mastery of style and artifice. That seems true, but the question still remains: why style and artifice rather than anything else? A reason is suggested by a German survey of gay people, the results of which were published in an early *Gay News* (London). It found that gays were extremely 'adaptable'; that is, we tend to find it easy to fit in to any occupation, or set-up, or circle of people. Or rather, and this is the point, we find it easy to appear to fit in, we are good at picking up the rules, conventions, forms and appearances of different social circles. And why? Because we've had to be good at it, we've had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in – we couldn't afford to stand out in any way, for it might give the game away about our gayness. So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms: style. Small wonder then that when we came to develop our own culture, the habit of style should have remained so dominant in it.

Looked at in this way, the camp sensibility is very much a product of our oppression. And, inevitably, it is scarred by that oppression. Some of the minuses of camp as a sensibility I've already mentioned – the relegation of its practitioners to licensed decorators on the edges of society, its involvement with the objectification of women. Other minuses resemble the drawbacks of camp behaviour.

The emphasis on surface and style can become obsessive – nothing can be taken seriously, anything deep or problematic or heavy is shimmied away from in a flurry of chic. Camp seems often unable to discriminate between

those things that need to be treated for laughs and style, and those that are genuinely serious and important.

Beside this, camp is so beguiling that it has been adopted by many straights of late. But something happens to camp when taken over by straights: it loses its cutting edge, its identification with the gay experience, its distance from the straight sexual world-view. Take the example of John Wayne. Gay camp can emphasise what a production number the Wayne image is – the lumbering gait, drawling voice and ever more craggy face are a deliberately constructed and manufactured image of virility. In this way, gay camp can stop us from treating John Wayne as an embodiment of what it 'really' means to be a man. Straight camp puts a different emphasis. The authority, power and roughness of the Wayne image are still dear to the straight imagination, but they have been criticised heavily enough in recent years (by gays and camp among others) for there to be embarrassment about directly accepting or endorsing such qualities. Camp allows straight audiences to reject the style of John Wayne; but because it is so pleasant to laugh, it also allows for a certain wistful affection for him to linger on. However, affection for John Wayne can only be in reality affection for that way of being a man. Straight camp allows images of butchness to retain their hold even while they are apparently being rejected.

Of course, this twisting of camp away from its radical/progressive/critical potential is only possible because of the ambiguity of camp even within gay circles. (For instance, the drawings of Tom of Finland are at one level over-the-top camp, but also clearly a turn-on too.) Not all gay camp is in fact progressive, but none the less it does have the potential of being so. What camp can do is to demystify the images and world-view of art and the media. We are encouraged by schooling to be very solemn in the presence of art; and we are tempted by film and television to be drawn into the worlds they present as if they were real. Camp can make us see that what art and the media give us are not the Truth or Reality but fabrications, particular ways of talking about the world, particular understandings and feelings of the way life is. Art and the media don't give us life as it really is – how could they ever? – but only life as artists and producers think it is. Camp, by drawing attention to the artifices employed by artists, can constantly remind us that what we are seeing is only a view of life. This doesn't stop us enjoying it, but it does stop us believing what we are shown too readily. It stops us thinking that those who create the landscape of culture know more about life than we do ourselves. A camp appreciation of art and the media can keep us on our guard against them – and considering their view of gayness, and sexuality in general, that's got to be a good thing.

In his introduction to the first *Playgun*<sup>6</sup> he edited, Roger Baker quoted Dennis Altman's lovely phrase, 'Camp is to gay what soul is to black'. That's right – but push at the resemblance a bit and you get to the ambiguities of both camp and soul. Soul is not unequivocally a good thing. Certainly, it

provides blacks (some blacks) with a definitely black culture; with its roots in religion, it provides an openness to irrational experience that white culture tends to play down; and with its connections to dance and ritual, it allows for a physical freedom, a being-at-home-in-your-body, that repressed white culture shies away from. But soul also reinforces notions of black people as mindless, superstitious and sex-obsessed – it may at times hold them back from making claims on the equally human and useful attributes of rationality and restraint. There is the same equivocality about camp. It does give us (some of us) an identity, it does undercut sex roles and the dominant world-view, it is fun; but it can also trap us if we are not careful in the endless pursuit of enjoyment at any price, in a rejection of seriousness and depth of feeling. What we've got to do is to activate the positive attributes of camp – mince in the streets, send up Kojak and Burt Reynolds and Colt models, come together for a camp, keep our oppression at bay with a scream and a joke – without letting them trap us.

You know those clenched fists you get on political badges (including women's liberation and GLF)? Well, why shouldn't it be a clenched fist on a limp wrist? Divine.

### Acknowledgement

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### Notes

- 1 The most complete and scholarly account is Cleto 1999, which also includes most of the classic texts. I only give in the further reading below works not included in Cleto.
- 2 Autobiography Crisp 1968, TV movie Jack Gold/Thames Television 1975.
- 3 Campaign for Homosexual Equality.
- 4 Gay Liberation Front.
- 5 When this essay was written, I did not pause to consider the implications of this then quite common phrase among white queens for my account of camp. The relation of camp to whiteness is discussed in Robertson 1999. However, although the camp I discuss here is basically white, camp is certainly not an exclusively white phenomenon (cf. Riggs 1992, Varia 2000). I admit to adding *Pakeezah* (a fabulous Hindi movie with a big gay following), Little Richard and Sylvester to my list of camp things for this republication. My thanks to Kush Varia for correspondence on this matter.
- 6 The British softporn gay magazine which originally commissioned this article. This may also be the opportunity for acknowledging that the thing people always like most about this article, its title, was in fact supplied by *Playguy's* editor, Roger Baker.

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## Further reading

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