



A (Camp) Flavour of Camp

[Fabio Cleto (ed.), *Pop 'camp'*, Milano, Marcos y Marcos, 2008, 2 vols., 637 pp. ISBN 978-88-7168-449-9, ISBN 978-88-7168-493-2]

by Marco Canani

At the beginning of her "Notes on Camp" (1964) Susan Sontag felt the urge to warn her readers that "[a] sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about." 'Camp' is a sensibility, and as such it is quite tough – if not impossible – to define it thoroughly. The first definition of 'camp' is perhaps the vaguest ever given, but, for this reason, paradoxically, it is the most accurate: published in 1909, *The Passing English of the Victorian Era: A Dictionary of Heterodox English, Slang and Phrase*, plainly speaks of "[a]ctions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis." The entry of the *OED* is less critical and brushes the issue off with a series of adjectives: "ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical." Moreover, in its thesaurus, it lists the adjectives 'queer', 'gay' and 'pink', all of which are connoted in a derogatory, rather than ontological, way.

The difficulties faced by lexicographers are partly due to the nature of 'camp', which may also account for the scarcity of the attention that Italian academics have devoted to the subject. Fabio Cleto seemed to be well aware of this when he edited his reader *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* in 1999 for The University of Michigan Press. This influential work paved the way for his subsequent anthology: published in 2008 for Marcos y Marcos, *PopCamp* attempts to fill the void of the Italian academy (and publishing industry) on the subject with a selection of translations of the 'classics' of 'camp'.



The layout of the two-volume anthology is itself 'camp'. Cleto's work recalls the theatrical game of (self-)parody and disguise by replacing chapters and sections with acts, scenes and intervals that form specific units. However, the anthology can be approached through a number of reading paths which, while developing different themes, all share Cleto's attempt to give us a taste of 'camp'. The blend of narrative and critical texts leads the reader into the varied panorama of the writings that have investigated, but above all 'made', the 'camp' sensibility.

First of all, Cleto captures the debate on the definition of 'camp', which dates back to Sontag. For the writer, 'camp' aesthetics has its "Elective Affinities" with specific art forms, like fashion, furniture – especially *Art Nouveau*, but also a great deal of what is nowadays labelled 'interior design' – ballet, opera and pop music, as well as those feature films which, although desirable nominees for the Golden Raspberry Awards, are nonetheless worth critical attention. 'Camp' is neither the expression of the moralistic sensibility of highbrow culture, nor that of extreme emotions, but rather an utterly aesthetic experience of the world – the hysteria of aestheticism that refuses the alleged supremacy of morality and content. For this reason, in his "Secondo manifesto 'camp'" (1979) Patrick Mauriès points out that 'camp' is inevitably doomed to decay for its devouring and bulimic expelling what is 'fashionable' and adopting as its *raison d'être* Thorstein Veblen's category of conspicuous waste.

Cleto is right in including Vivian Gornick in the panorama of writers and critics who have investigated 'camp'. In "Quando il pop diventa omosessuale" (1966), Gornick criticises Sontag's assumption on the tender blend of "the naive and the inconsequential", which is typical of 'camp'. Moreover, she explains its interconnection with the gay culture as the result of the malice, hysteria and schizophrenia aimed at mocking the upper-class that scorns and condemns homosexuality.

Cleto also offers an insight into the 'camp' taste for the exaggerate decoration of the body. Fashion is not appropriated and consumed in the sense of Veblen's trickle-down theory, but as the vaudeville of clothing that, at the level of social practices, replicates the cumulative intertextuality which for Mauriès is the hallmark of camp literature. Such a practice is excellently expressed in Tom Wolfe's "La ragazza dell'anno" (1964):

Bangs manes bouffant beehives Beatle caps butter faces brush-on lashes decal eyes puffy sweaters French thrust bras flailing leather blue jeans stretch pants stretch jeans honeydew bottoms éclair shanks elf boots ballerinas Knight slippers, hundreds of them, these flaming little buds, bobbing and screaming, rocketing around inside the Academy of Music Theater underneath that vast old moldering cherub dome up there—aren't they super-marvelous!

In the literary texts selected by Cleto, the decoration of the body goes obsessively towards tacky accumulation and often mixes and confuses gender codes. The 'camp' adornment of the body seems the semiotic counterpart of obsessive



hoarding, which should not be read as gender mimicry, but rather as a practice of cross-gendering fostered by the luxurious excess depicted in Aubrey Beardsley's "La storia di Venere e Tannhäuser" (1896/1907):

Tannhäuser [...] wore long black silk stockings, a pair of pretty garters, a very elegant ruffled shirt, slippers and a wonderful dressing gown. Claude and Clair wore nothing at all, delicious privilege of immaturity, and Farcy was in ordinary evening clothes. As for the rest of the company, it boasted some very noticeable dresses, and whole tables of quite delightful coiffures. There were spotted veils that seemed to stain the skin with some exquisite and august disease [...]. There were wigs of black and scarlet wools, of peacocks' feathers, of gold and silver threads, of swansdown, of the tendrils of the vine, and of human hairs; huge collars of stiff muslin rising high above the head; [...] stockings clocked with fêtes galantes, and curious designs; and petticoats cut like artificial flowers. Some of the women had put on delightful little moustaches dyed in purples and bright greens, twisted and waxed with absolute skill; and some wore great white beards, after the manner of Saint Wilgeforte.

Beardsley's orgiastic triumph of carnivalesque forms and colours is no less grotesque than the transvestism to which Cyril Connolly forces his James Bond in "Missione tacchi a spillo (1963), a fully queering practice that has more in common with drag queens than with transgender. Yet, there is another affinity that links together the categories of 'camp' and queer: they are both discursive practices and acts of semiosis through which, as Beaver states by recalling the words of Roland Barthes in "Segni omosessuali (in memoria di Roland Barthes)" (1981), "meaning and sex become the object of free play, at the heart of which the (polysemant) forms and the (sensual) practices, liberated from the binary prison, will achieve a state of infinite expansion" in the utopic hope free societies will grant their citizens "as many languages as there are desires." 'Camp' is a discourse, the language shared by the members of the association that has given itself the acronym "C.A.M.P." as a name and which, according to Summers in Victor J. Banis's "L'uomo della C.A.M.P." (1966), was established "to protect a bunch of fairies."

Not unlike Hellenism in late Victorian Oxford, 'camp' is the expression of a subculture (or of a counterdiscourse, in Foucaultian terms). It is poignant that Sontag reappropriates Matthew Arnold's dichotomy between Hellenism and Hebraism and modernizes it into Hebraism and Homosexuality. For Sontag, the two categories identify two spaces of resistance which, although lying at the margins, significantly contributed to steer the dominant culture of 1960s England, a period in which "high styles come from low places, from people who have no power, who slink away from it, in fact, who are marginal, who carve out worlds for themselves in the nether depths, in tainted 'undergrounds'" (Sontag 1964). Until 'camp' is swallowed – not unlike the other subcultures – by the upper-class it mocks, with a bottom-up movement that



contradicts Veblen's trickle-down theory. For this reason, Gornick seems to acknowledge homosexuality the status of a "cultural lobby" steering contemporary pop culture. In her mind, homosexuality is "a fact of existence, [...] capable of producing a culture" which relies on semiotic practices to find its (self)legitimation. As Harold Beaver puts it, homosexuality produces a set of "reverse codes" by drawing on ideas, roles and messages and "orgiastically wasting their content merely for the form."

The peripheral position of 'camp', its status of reverse discourse and the celebration of excess to the point of saturation consolidate its close link to homosexual culture, which, Gornick says, is ontologically based on "the gruesome attempt to be gay all your life, to be professionally gay all your life," an imperative that leads both to a constant "preoccupation with trivia" and to "the parodic echo of the woman." At the level of sexuality, this attitude finds its counterpart in the orgiastic dissoluteness embraced by Venus's satyrs and courtiers in Beardsley's novel, in which "[d]uchesses and Maréchaux, Marquises and Princesses, Dukes and Marshalls, Marquesses and Princes, were ravished and stretched and rumped and crushed beneath the interminable vigour and hairy breasts of the inflamed woodlanders."

Curiously enough, even the Church is not immune from the irreverence and desecration of 'camp', as the works of Ronald Firbank and Maurice Sachs suggest. In his essay on "Le machine divine," Luca Scarlini argues that the Catholic Church has enforced the same abuse and violence of Beardsley's satires and gives an interesting insight into the cruelty of the castrate industry from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century.

Hence, the expediency of investigating 'camp' as one of the subcultures that sprouted in England in the 1960s. However, in "Post/moderno. Sulla sensibilità gay" (1991), Dollimore – whose fault consists in juxtaposing 'camp' and homosexuality so closely that they almost coincide – wonders if the kaleidoscopic representations of homosexuality should be considered as the direct expression of what they illustrate or, rather, as the indirect product of repression and sublimation. Be it as it may, Cleto is aware of the significance of the problem of representation within the discourse of 'camp', and offers one more important reading path through a rich iconographic collection consisting of 273 illustrations, drawings, pictures and photographs, posters, engravings and réclames. Such accurate selection is not a mere decoration to the text, but it is consistent with the purpose of offering the reader an inductive insight into the nature of 'camp', beginning from its verbal/narrative and visual representations.

The only regret is the lack of sources looking into the representations of 'camp' in the present days. It is undeniable that Cleto's work ought to be praised for providing the Italian translations of the classics of 'camp' culture. Future studies should hopefully explore its representation and presence during and after the 'camp' decade *par excellence*, the 1980s. With their playful excess and exaggeration, the Eighties witnessed the emergence of queer discourse and welcomed 'camp' into mass culture,



which discovered the potential of commercial television for the first time. With the birth of MTV in August 1981, popular culture was ultimately transformed by new communication practices based on the accumulation and the overlapping of signs and messages and found in video clips a form of expression that partially unhinged the link between 'camp' and homosexuality. As Hawkins has put it, Madonna has been for over three decades the symbol of a "unique blend of 'camp' [which] can be perceived as an attempt to disavow the control mechanisms of a male-driven industry" (Hawkins 2004: 18) and which paved the way for even more commercial, but no less 'camp', spin-offs in the music and entertainment industry, from Robin Williams's interpretation of *Mrs. Doubtfire* in 1993 (which owes much to Joe Orton's Edna Welthorpe, also anthologized by Cleto) and the 'rebirth' of Cher in the late 1990s, to the most recent androgynous performances of Lady Gaga.

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