

Camp and the Gay Sensibility

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What I aim to do in this essay is to consider some of the ways in which individual films, stars, and directors reflect a gay sensibility. In the course of this exploration, I hope to accomplish the following aims: to provide a more precise definition of what is, at present, a most confused area of response that goes under the vague label of *camp*; to ascertain the relationship of camp and gayness; to consider some of the social patterns and mechanisms that make for the gay sensibility; to relate these considerations to cinema with the purpose of stimulating discussion of a hitherto neglected aspect of film; to promote solidarity and a greater sense of identification among gays; to remind readers that what we see in cinema is neither truth nor reality, but fabrications: individual, subjective perceptions of the world and its inhabitants; and, finally, to argue that there is far more fun in art and art in fun than many of us will even now allow.

The Gay Sensibility

I define the gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is colored, shaped, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness. Such a perception of the world varies with time and place according to the nature of the specific set of circumstances in which, historically, we have found ourselves. Present-day society defines people as falling into distinct types. Such a method of labeling ensures that indi-

vidual types become polarized. A complement of attributes thought to be "natural" and "normal" for members of these categories is assigned. Hence, heterosexuality = normal, natural, healthy behavior; homosexuality = abnormal, unnatural, sick behavior. Out of this process of polarization there develops a twin set of perspectives and general understandings about what the world is like and how to deal with it. For gays, one such response is camp.

Camp

The term *camp* describes those elements in a person, situation, or activity that express, or are created by, a gay sensibility. Camp is never a thing or person per se, but, rather, a relationship between activities, individuals, situations, and gayness. People who have camp, e.g., screen "personalities" such as Tallulah Bankhead or Edward Everett Horton, or who are in some way responsible for camp—Busby Berkeley or Josef von Sternberg—need not be gay. The link with gayness is established when the camp aspect of an individual or thing is identified as such by a gay sensibility. This is not to say that all gays respond in equal measure to camp, or, even, that an absolute consensus could easily be reached within our community about what to include or emphasize. Yet though camp resides largely in the eye of the beholder, there remains an underlying unity of perspective among gays that gives to someone or something its characteristic camp flavor. Four features are basic to camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor.

Camp/Irony

Irony is the subject matter of camp, and refers here to any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association. The most common of incongruous contrasts is that of masculine/feminine. Some of the best examples of this can be found in the screen personalities of stars whose attraction, as camp, owes much to their androgynous qualities, e.g., Greta Garbo in all her films, but particularly *Queen Christina* (1933), where she masquerades as a man; Mick Jagger in *Performance*, where the pop star's persona is achieved through radical neutering via the elision of masculine/feminine "signs"; the Andy Warhol stars Holly Woodlawn, Candy Darling, and Jackie Curtis in films such as *Flesh* and *Women in Revolt* (1972).

Another incongruous contrast is that of youth/(old) age: the Gloria Swanson–William Holden relationship in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), or that of Bud Cort–Ruth Gordon in *Harold and Maude* (1971); as well as the Bette Davis

characters Fanny Trellis and Jane Hudson in *Mr. Skeffington* (1944) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962): aging, egocentric women obsessed with the romantic illusions of youth and unable to reconcile themselves to the reality of old age.

Other, less frequently employed contrasts are the sacred/profane (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1945]), spirit/flesh (*Summer and Smoke* [1961]), *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* [1961]), and high/low status, as in dozens of rags-to-riches musicals (*The Countess of Monte Cristo* [1934]) and melodramas (*Ruby Gentry* [1952]).

At the core of this perception of incongruity is the idea of gayness as a moral deviation. Two men or two women in love are generally regarded by society as incongruous—out of keeping with the "normal," "natural," "healthy" order of things. In sum, it is thought to be morally wrong.

Camp/Aestheticism

The aesthetic element is also basic to camp. Irony, if it is to be effective, must be shaped. The art of camp therefore relies largely upon arrangement, timing, and tone. Similarly, the ironic events and situations which life itself presents will be more or less effective depending on how well the precision, balance, and economy of a thing are maintained. Camp is aesthetic in three interrelated ways: as a view of art; as a view of life; and as a practical tendency in things or persons: "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence."¹

Wilde's epigram points to a crucial aspect of camp aestheticism: its opposition to puritan morality. Camp is subversive of commonly received standards. As Susan Sontag has said, there is something profoundly "propagandistic" about it: "homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation."²

Consistently followed as a comprehensive attitude, aestheticism inevitably leads to an ingrown selfishness in life, and to triviality in art. As a means to personal liberation through the exploration of experience, camp is an assertion of one's self-integrity—a temporary means of accommodation with society in which art becomes, at one and the same time, an intense mode of individualism and a form of spirited protest. And while camp advocates the dissolution of hard and inflexible moral rules, it pleads, too, for a morality of sympathy. Its viewpoint suggests detachment from conventional standards. Here again, as R. V. Johnson has pointed out, there is an aspect of aestheticism

which diverges from "a puritan ethic of rigid 'thou shalt nots,'" preferring, instead, to regard people and ideas with due consideration to circumstances and individual temperament.³

A good example of this is found in Jack Hazan's quasi-documentary portrait of artist David Hockney, *A Bigger Splash*. Here the director manages to convey the wry, distancing nature of his subject's visual humor as an integral part of a gay sensibility that is defiantly different from the mainstream. Because Hockney responds to his gay "stigma" by challenging social and aesthetic conventions in life and art, Hazan's concern is to show the various ways in which his subject's private life affects his art—or how art records personal experience and determines our future. Thus, the film relates to the artist's work in much the same way as the paintings do to life. The presence of the unseen beneath the surface is no less important than what one actually sees.

This double aspect in which things can be taken is further emphasized by the semi-documentary nature of Hazan's film. Hockney and his friends appear as themselves, so that the relationships portrayed are much the same as in reality. But the reality is also rehearsed: Hazan occasionally suggests themes for his "characters" to act out, and the line separating being and role-playing becomes blurred. This convention appears to suit Hockney, whose deceptive innocence and disorientating self-created face (platinum blonde hair, owl-rimmed spectacles) exhibit a special feeling for performance and a flair for the theatrical. And though the film remains, in the final analysis, a subjective record of *one* gay life in which the conjunction of fantasy and experience make common cause, it does effectively isolate the strong strain of protest that resides in the gay sensibility. By wit, a well-organized evasiveness, and a preference for the artificial, Hockney manages a breakthrough into creativity.

This detached attitude does not necessarily indicate an inability to feel or perceive the seriousness of life. In Hockney's case, it is a means of defiance: a refusal to be overwhelmed by unfavorable odds. When the world is a rejecting place, the need grows correspondingly strong to project one's being—to explore the limits to which one's personality might attain—as a way of shielding the inner self from those on the outside who are too insensitive to understand. It is also a method whereby one can multiply personalities, play various parts, assume a variety of roles—both for fun as well as out of real need.

In film, the aesthetic element in camp further implies a movement away from contemporary concerns into realms of exotic or subjective fantasies; the depiction of states of mind that are (in terms of commonly accepted taboos and standards) suspect; an emphasis on sensuous surfaces, textures, imagery, and the evocation of mood as stylistic devices—not simply because they are appropriate to the plot, but as fascinating in themselves. Such tendencies as

these are consonant with the spirit of aestheticism in camp, and also go some way toward explaining the charm which particular film genres have for a certain section of our community.

The horror genre, in particular, is susceptible to a camp interpretation. Not all horror films are camp, of course; only those which make the most of stylish conventions for expressing instant feeling, thrills, sharply defined personality, outrageous and "unacceptable" sentiments, and so on. In addition, the psychological issues stated or implied, along with the sources of horror, must relate to some significant aspect of our situation and experience; e.g., the inner drives which threaten an individual's well-being and way of life (Tourneur's *The Cat People* [1942], Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [1941]), coping with pressures to conform and adapt (Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]), the masking of "abnormality" behind a façade of "normality" (Robson's *The Seventh Victim* [1943], Ulmer's *The Black Cat* [1943]), personal rebellion against enforced restrictions (Burrowe's *Incense for the Damned* [1970]).

As a practical tendency in things or persons, camp emphasizes style as a means of self-projection, a conveyor of meaning, and an expression of emotional tone. Style is a form of consciousness; it is never "natural," always acquired. Camp is also urban; it is, in part, a reaction to the anonymity, boredom, and socializing tendencies of technological society. Camp aims to transform the ordinary into something more spectacular. In terms of style, it signifies performance rather than existence. Clothes and décor, for example, can be a means of asserting one's identity, as well as a form of justification in a society which denies one's essential validity.⁴ Just as the dandy of the nineteenth century sought in material visibility (as Auden has said of Baudelaire) "a way out of the corrupt nature into which he, like everyone else, is born,"⁵ so many of our community find in the decorative arts and the cultivation of exquisite taste a means of making something positive from a discredited social identity. Hence, the *soigné* furniture and furnishings of the flat designed for Franz in Fassbinder's *Fox and His Friends*, or the carefully cluttered modishness of Michael's apartment in William Friedkin's film adaptation of Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*.*

By such means as these one aims to become what one wills, to exercise some control over one's environment. But the emphasis on style goes further. Camp

*A distinction must be drawn here between kitsch and camp. The latter implies fervent involvement—an ability to strongly identify with what is perceived as camp. Not so the former, which refers to the artistically shallow or vulgar, and is marked by sensationalism, sentimentalism, and slickness. With regard to décor, kitsch can be seen in George Schlatter's *Norman . . . Is That You?* where the furniture, curtains, chandeliers, paintings, ornaments, etc., provided by set decorator Fred R. Price function principally as things to be mocked.

is often exaggerated. When the stress on style is "outrageous" or "too much," it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or a person *is* to what it *looks* like; from *what* is being done to *how* it is being done.

This stress on stylization can also explain why the musical comedy, with its high budgets and big stars, its open indulgence in sentiment, and its emphasis on atmosphere, mood, nostalgia, and the fantastic, is, along with horror, a film genre that is saturated with camp. This can best be seen in the boldly imaginative production numbers of Busby Berkeley, whose work reveals a penchant for total extravagance, voyeurism, and sexual symbolism that is particularly blatant in "The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat" sequence of *The Girls He Left Behind* [1943] (also called *The Gang's All Here*), with its acres of female flesh, outrageously phallic dancing bananas, and Carmen Miranda at her most aggressively self-assertive.

Camp/Theatricality

The third element of camp is theatricality. To appreciate camp in things or persons is to perceive the notion of life-as-theater, being versus role-playing, reality and appearance. If "role" is defined as the appropriate behavior associated with a given position in society, then gays do not conform to socially expected ways of behaving as men and women. Camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and, in particular, sex roles, are superficial—a matter of style. Indeed, life itself is role and theater, appearance, and impersonation.

Theatricality relates to the gay situation primarily in respect to roles. Gays do not conform to sex-role expectations: we do not show appropriate interest in the opposite sex as a possible source of sexual satisfaction. We are therefore seen as something less than "real" men and women. This is the essence of gay stigma, our so-called failing. Gayness is seen as a sort of collective denial of the moral and social order of things. Our very lifestyle indicates a rejection of that most cherished cultural assumption which says that masculinity (including sexual dominance over women) is "natural" and appropriate for men, and femininity (including sexual submissiveness toward men) is "natural" and appropriate for women. The stigma of gayness is unique insofar as it is not immediately apparent either to ourselves or to others. Upon discovery of our gayness, however, we are confronted with the possibility of avoiding the negative sanctions attached to our supposed failing by concealing information (i.e., signs which other people take for gay) from the rest of the world. This crucial fact of our existence is called *passing for straight*, a phenomenon generally defined in the metaphor of theater, that is, playing a role: pretending to be

something that one is not; or, to shift the motive somewhat, to camouflage our gayness by withholding facts about ourselves which might lead others to the correct conclusion about our sexual orientation.⁶

The art of passing is an acting art: to pass is to be "on stage," to impersonate heterosexual citizenry, to pretend to be a "real" (i.e., straight) man or woman. Such a practice of passing (which can be occasional, continuous, in the past or present) means, in effect, that one must be always on one's guard lest one be seen to "deviate" from those culturally standardized canons of taste, behavior, speech, and so forth, that are generally associated with the male and female roles as defined by the society in which we live. Because masculinity and femininity are perceived in exclusively heterosexual terms, our social stereotype (and often, self-image) is that of one who rejects his or her masculinity or femininity. Those unwilling to accept their socially defined roles are appropriately stigmatized. Proving one's "manhood" or being a "lady" is thus closely linked to the rejection of gay characteristics. In women, repression is often internalized; in men, it may be externalized in aggressive behavior.

The experience of passing is often productive of a gay sensibility. It can, and often does, lead to a heightened awareness and appreciation for disguise, impersonation, the projection of personality, and the distinctions to be made between instinctive and theatrical behavior. The experience of passing would appear to explain the enthusiasm of so many in our community for certain stars whose performances are highly charged with exaggerated (usually sexual) role-playing. Some of these seem (or are made to seem) fairly "knowing," if not self-parodying, in their roles: Jayne Mansfield holding two full milk bottles to her breasts in *The Girl Can't Help It* (1957); Bette Davis in *Beyond the Forest* (1949); Anita Ekberg in *La dolce vita*; Mae West in all her films; Cesar Romero as the Cisco Kid and in *The Good Fairy* (1935). Others are apparently more "innocent" or "sincere": Jane Russell in *The Outlaw* (1943); Raquel Welch; Mamie van Doren; Jennifer Jones in *Duel in the Sun* (1947); Johnny Weismuller as Tarzan and Jungle Jim; Ramon Novarro, particularly in *Ben Hur* (1927) and *The Student Prince (in Old Heidelberg)* (1928).

The time factor is also crucial to one's appreciation of camp theatricality. A good deal of the screen acting which only recently appeared quite "natural" will, in the goodness of time, doubtless become camp for its high degree of stylization (that is, if it is not already camp). Examples: the "method" acting of Rod Steiger and early Brando; so, too, the charming, "dated" styles of George Arliss, Luise Rainer, or Miriam Hopkins. Similarly, a number of personalities from the silent cinema, once revered for their sexual allure, now seem, in the seventies, fairly fantastic: Theda Bara and Pola Negri. Men, as David Thomson has observed, have always had an insecure hold on the camera,⁷ so that male

sex appeal, for example, in the case of Rudolph Valentino, vanished much more quickly than did the sway exerted by women. Finding such stars camp is not to mock them, however. It is more a way of poking fun at the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identifications which our society uses to oppress its women and repress its men—including those on screen. This is not to say that those who appreciate the camp in such stars must, ipso facto, be politically “aware”; often, they are not. The response is mainly instinctive; there is something of the shock of recognition in it—the idea of seeing on screen the absurdity of those roles that each of us is urged to play with such a deadly seriousness.

Thus, camp as a response to performance springs from the gay sensibility’s preference for the *intensities* of character, as opposed to its content: what the character conveys tends to be less important than *how* or *why* it is conveyed. Camp is individualistic; as such, it relishes the uniqueness and the force with which personality is imbued. This theatricalization of experience derives both from the passing experience (wherein, paradoxically, we learn the value of the self while at the same time rejecting it) and from a heightened sensitivity to aspects of a performance which others are likely to regard as routine or uncalculated.⁸ It is this awareness of the double aspect of a performance that goes a long way to explain why gays form a disproportionately large and enthusiastic part of the audience of such stars as, most notably, Judy Garland.

In part, at least, Garland’s popularity owes much to the fact that she is always, and most intensely, herself. Allied to this is the fact that many of us seem able to equate our own strongly felt sense of oppression (past or present) with the suffering/loneliness/misfortunes of the star both on and off the screen. Something in the star’s personality allows for an empathy that colors one’s whole response to the performer and the performance. As Vicki Lester in Cukor’s *A Star is Born* (1954), but, especially, as the concert singer in Ronald Neame’s *I Could Go on Singing* (1962), Garland took on roles so disconcertingly close to her real-life situation and personality that the autobiographical connections actually appeared to take their toll on her physical appearance from one scene to the next. Such performances as these solidified the impression, already formed in the minds of her most ardent admirers, of an integrity arising directly out of her great personal misfortunes.

Camp/Humor

The fourth characteristic of camp is its humor. This results from an identification of a strong incongruity between an object, person, or situation and its context. The comic element is inherent in the formal properties of irony. There

is a basic contradiction or incongruity, coupled with a real or pretended innocence. But in order for an incongruous contrast to be ironic it must, in addition to being comic, affect one as “painful”—though not so painful as to neutralize the humor. It is sufficient that sympathy is aroused for the person, thing, or idea that constitutes the target of an incongruous contrast. To be affected in this way, one’s feelings need to clash. It follows, then, that—as A. R. Thompson has argued in his study of irony: “contrasts which conform exactly to the objective definitions of irony are not ironical at all when they do not arouse . . . conflicting feelings.”⁹

Humor constitutes the strategy of camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity. This humor takes several forms. Chief of these is bitter-wit, which expresses an underlying hostility and fear. Society says to gays (and to all stigmatized groups) that we are members of the wider community; we are subject to the same laws as “normals”; we must pay our taxes, and so on; we are, in short, “just like everybody else.” On the other hand, we are not received into society on equal terms; indeed, we are told that we are unacceptably “different” in ways that are absolutely fundamental to our sense of self and social identity. In other words, the message conveyed to us by society is highly contradictory: we are just like everyone else, and yet . . . we are not. It is this basic contradiction, this joke, that has traditionally been our destiny.

Not surprisingly, this contradiction has produced, in many, an identity-ambivalence that has found expression in our talk, our behavior, our artistic efforts; in fact, our whole perception of the world and of our place in it. Like other oppressed groups, gays have developed skills out of much the same need to concentrate on strategy when the rules are stacked against us. Those of us who are sufficiently sensitive to criticism of ourselves may develop a commensurate ability to isolate, dissect, and bring into vivid focus the destructiveness and hypocrisy of others. It is thus that in much of our humor lies a strain of irony that is strongly flavored with hostility for society, as well as for ourselves. As Erving Goffman has said: “Given that the stigmatised individual in our society acquires identity standards which he applies to himself in spite of failing to conform to them, it is inevitable that he will feel some ambivalence about his own self.”¹⁰

This tendency to see ourselves as others do is to some extent changing, and will continue to change as we come to define ourselves in terms that do not assume heterosexuality as the norm. In the past, however, and, to a lesser extent, in the present, our response to this split between heterosexual standards and self-demands has been a bitter-wit that is deeply imbued with self-hate and self-derogation. This can best be illustrated in films such as *Staircase*,

Boys in the Band, and *The Killing of Sister George*, all of which are perhaps far too maudlin to be called camp, but whose characters do reflect, in exaggerated form, much of that bitter-wit that goes by the name of camp.

For example, in *Staircase*, directed by Stanley Donen, the humor is saturated with the sadness of those perceived as doomed to live their lives with "unsuitable" emotions in a world where such feelings are tacitly recognized but officially condemned. Thus, throughout the film, the dialogue comments on the central couple's awful-funny confrontation with the "normal" world outside; it is riddled with the self-hatred and low self-esteem of those who have successfully internalized straight society's opinion of us. Self-pity and an aching sense of loss are the prevailing themes: "You've been a father," Charlie hisses at Harry, "a privilege denied thousands of us!" Such dialogue, geared for a "superior" laugh, is squarely based on the tacit acceptance of the hegemony of heterosexual institutions. As for Donen's own patronizing view of these proceedings, this finds its most appropriate metaphor in the maudlin tones of Ray Charles pleading in song on the soundtrack over the flickering images of gay angst to "Forgive them for they know not what they do." Finally, the very conventions of the commercial cinema provide their own language of lament via the presence of such big-name, belligerently straight-associated types as Rex Harrison (Charlie) and Richard Burton (Harry).

Camp can thus be a means of undercutting rage by its derision of concentrated bitterness. Its vision of the world is comic. Laughter, rather than tears, is its chosen means of dealing with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society. Yet it is also true that camp is something of a protopolitical phenomenon. It assumes gayness to be a category that defines the self, and it steadfastly refuses to repudiate our long heritage of gay ghetto life. Any appreciation of camp, therefore, expresses an empathy with typical gay experiences, even when this takes the form of finding beauty in the seemingly bizarre and outrageous, or discovering the worthiness in a thing or person that is supposedly without value. Finally, camp can be subversive—a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all, gay and straight, and, in particular, women.

Yet because camp combines fun and earnestness, it runs the risk of being considered not serious at all. Usually overlooked by critics of the gay sensibility is camp's strategy of irony. Camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humor, and theatricality, allows us to witness "serious" issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed. The "serious" is, in fact, crucial to camp. Though camp mocks the solemnities of our culture, it never totally discards the seriousness of a thing or individual.

As a character in a Christopher Isherwood novel says: "You can't camp about something you don't take seriously; you're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance."¹¹

Camp and the Serious: Fassbinder's Bitter Tears

As a way of illustrating camp in service of the serious, consider Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Here, as in almost all of this director's work, the problem of how to make radical social commentary without alienating audiences is resolved by distancing the action—finding a common denominator to anchor the message. In *Bitter Tears* the mannerist stylization which dominates the mise en scène, the grand gestures, comic routines, and the melodramatic tendencies of the plot, constitute the strategy whereby Fassbinder aims to both distance and engage his audience. As Thomas Elsaesser has pointed out in "A Cinema of Vicious Circles," Fassbinder's search for an "unprovocative realism" has led the director to discover for the German cinema "the importance of being artificial" as a strategy for forcing an audience to question its assumptions about society and its inhabitants.¹²

This artificiality is the camp aspect of *Bitter Tears*. A highly theatricalized world devoid of the very passions that constitute its subject is provided by the director's formalized, almost Racinian dialogue; his elaborate, carefully calculated compositions locked into theatrical tableaux; the anachronistic costumes and masklike makeup that reflect the psychological situation of the characters; the comic pop/classical music references—the incongruous juxtaposition of Verdi, the Platters, and the Walker Brothers; the stylized performances and ritualized division of the film into five acts, each heralded by the heroine's change of dress and wig; the expressive lighting effects that emphasize a world of masters and servants, predators and victims; and, generally, the formalized editing style which makes the most of the film's single set—a studio apartment that is dominated by a huge brass bed, a wall-sized mural-with-male-nude that bears ironic witness to the action below, and a scattered group of bald-pated mannequins whose poses are continuously rearranged as commentary on their human counterparts.

Each scene is so organized as to heighten the irony of Petra von Kant's (Margit Carstensen) inability to reconcile theory (a loving relationship must be free, honest, and nonpossessive) and practice. This failure is particularly apparent in Petra's sadomasochistic relationship with the omnipresent Marlene (Irm Hermann), a silent witness to her mistress's jealous possession of the sensual young model Karen (Hanna Schygulla), who ultimately rejects her

benefactress in favor of her (Karen's) former husband. When, in the bitterly ironic final scene, an outrageous mixture of comedy and cruelty, the chastened Petra reverses roles and offers "freedom and joy" to Marlene in return for companionship, the chalk-faced "slave" dispassionately packs her bags and makes a hasty exit, pausing only to drop "The Great Pretender" on the gramophone by way of vocal reply.

It is the very artificiality of Fassbinder's *Bitter Tears* that serves to support the characters and their emotions. The camp aspect of the work emerges in the use of calculated melodrama and flamboyant visual surfaces to accentuate the film's complex of interrelated themes: the interdependence of sex and power, love and suffering, pleasure and pain; the lover's demand for exclusive possession, which springs from vanity; the basic instability of love in the absence of a lover's sense of positive self-identity; the value of pose as an escape and protective shield; the inevitability of inequities within relationships so long as love, ego, or insights are distributed in unequal proportions. Such themes as these carry a special resonance for the gay sensibility. As outsiders, we are forced to create our own norms; to impose our *selves* upon a world which refuses to confront the arbitrariness of cultural conventions that insist on sexual loyalty, permanence, and exclusive possession. Fassbinder's film, by paying close attention to the ironic functions of style, aims to detach us, temporarily, from the serious content of the images—but which, later, encourages a more reflective analysis.

Further studies of the gay sensibility in relation to cinema will need to take account of the interaction of camp and genres, *auteur* theory, images of women, and so on. What follows are two brief, tentative case studies concerning camp and the gay sensibility in relation to the work of a single director (Josef von Sternberg) and in various films based on the drama and fiction of Tennessee Williams.

Sternberg as Camp

To explain the relation of Sternberg to camp it is necessary to return, briefly, to the phenomenon of passing for straight. This strategy of survival in a hostile world has sensitized us to disguises, impersonations, the significance of surfaces, the need to project personality, the intensities of character, and so on. Sternberg's films—in particular, the Dietrich films from *Morocco* (1930) to *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935)—are all camp insofar as they relate to those adjustment mechanisms of the gay sensibility. But they are also camp in that they reflect the director's ironic attitude toward his subject matter—a judgment that

says, in effect, that the content is of interest only insofar as it remains susceptible to transformation by means of stylization. What counts in one's view of Sternberg's films as a camp, then, is the perception of an underlying emotional autobiography—a disguise of self and obsessions by means of the artificial. One does not need to see these disguises in a strictly literal way. It is enough to sense the irony in the tensions that arise from Sternberg's anguish and cynicism, and his predilection for the most outrageous sexual symbolism as a means of objectifying personal fantasies.

Those who view camp either as a trivialization of taste or as a cultural conspiracy will frown on any labeling of Sternberg as camp. Indeed, several of this director's staunchest admirers have already attempted to "rescue" him from ridicule and replace his reputation in a suitably dignified light.¹³ For such critics neither the total experience nor the attitudes and emotional philosophy of the sensibility that produces camp are to be taken seriously. The validity of the camp statement, along with its cultural origins and associations, are regarded as of scant significance. Totally ignored is the fact that camp takes a radically different approach to the serious, one which relies heavily on aesthetic rather than moral considerations. Thus, to find camp in Sternberg is not to surrender to the joys of "over-decorated 'aesthetic' nothings."¹⁴ It is, rather, to appreciate the wit by which Sternberg renders his insights artificial; to sense something of an "affaire" between Dietrich and her director; to perceive the deep significance of appearances—a sumptuous surface that serves not as an empty and meaningless background, but as the very subject of the films: a visual context for Sternberg's fantasies.

Sternberg's style is the inevitable result of his need to impose himself upon his material; to control all the elements with which creative work concerns itself. Self-revelation is best accomplished when viewers are left undistracted by the story line. The more hackneyed the material, the better the opportunities for self-projection. There is no place for spontaneity in such a scheme, as one needs always to be in total control of the information conveyed by camera, sets, actors, and so on. Thus, the director demanded complete domination over every aspect of his films. His pictures were "acts of arrogance." Not only did the act of creation derive from him, but he, Sternberg, was also the object created: "Marlene is not Marlene," he insisted, "she is me."¹⁵

Claire Johnston has said of *Morocco* that

in order for a man to remain at the centre of the universe in a text which focuses on the image, the *auteur* is forced to repress the idea of woman as a social and sexual being (her Otherness) and to deny the opposition man/woman altogether. The woman as sign, then, becomes the pseudo-centre of the filmic discourse.

The incongruous contrast posed by the sign is "male/non-male," which the director established by disguising Dietrich in men's clothing.¹⁶ This is a masquerade that connects with the theme of sexual ambivalence, of central concern to the gay sensibility, and recurrent in Sternberg's work. Dietrich, then, functions principally as a primary motif. It is she, woman, who becomes the focus of Sternberg's symbolism, psychology, and sense of humor. As Amy Joly in *Morocco*; X-27, prostitute and spy, in *Dishonoured* (1931); Shanghai Lily, prostitute, in *Shanghai Express* (1932); Helen Faraday, nightclub entertainer and archetypal mother in *Blonde Venus* (1932); Sophia Frederica, later Catherine II, in *The Scarlet Empress* (1934); and Concha Perez in *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), Dietrich as woman becomes a manifestation of Sternberg's fantasies. The man takes over; the woman recedes into myth and the details of the décor. The image that emerges is man-made. But it is also an integral part of the larger camp structure. Hence, the danger to which camp enthusiasts expose themselves is as inevitable as it is irreducible, i.e., the danger of surrendering to the corroboration of Sternberg's fantasies as each, in turn, is thrown back on us by the male-manufactured image of the star who illuminates the screen.

The Gay Sensibility in the Films of Tennessee Williams

In the films based on the work of Tennessee Williams (I shall refer to these as "Williams's films" since, even when the plays and fiction are adapted for the screen by someone other than the author, they retain the spirit of the original) the image of women is again of central concern in any consideration of camp and the gay sensibility.¹⁷ The point I wish to take up here is one that various critics have used to denigrate both Williams's films and the gay sensibility; namely, that the typical heroine of these films is a "drag queen."¹⁸

This interpretation is nowhere more relentlessly pursued than in Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Haskell perceives Williams's women as products of the writer's own "baroquely transvestised homosexual fantasies." By no stretch of the imagination, she argues, can they conceivably be seen as "real" women. Hence, Vivien Leigh's Blanche DuBois and Karen Stone in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961); Geraldine Page's Alexandra Del Lago (the Princess Kosmonopolis) and Alma Winemiller in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1962) and *Summer and Smoke* (1958); Joanne Woodward's Carole Cutrere in *The Fugitive Kind* (1958); Ava Gardner's Maxine Faulk and Deborah Kerr's Hannah Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguana* (1964); Elizabeth Taylor's Flora (Sissy) Goforth in *Boom!* (1968), and on and on. All these characters, Haskell

argues, are "hermaphrodites" who flow from out of "the palpable fear and self-pity, guts and bravura of the aging homosexual." What happens here, the argument further goes, is that the gay author, seething with repressed desires, dons his female mask (Blanche, Karen, etc.) and hungrily heads, in print as on screen, for a host of fantasy males of his own creation: Stanley Kowalski/Marlon Brando, Paolo/Warren Beatty, Chance Wayne/Paul Newman. The "cultured homosexual" (Williams) is thus seen as being compelled, "often masochistically and against his taste," to love brutes and beachboys, natives and gigolos, primitives and peasants—as well as all the other unavailable prototypes of uninhibited sensuality.¹⁹

There is some truth in all this, of course. Williams has "used" women to his own advantage. His initial passing strategy for coping with the fact of his gayness was productive of deep anxiety which led to a certain conservatism in his work: a desire to protect himself against the prying eyes of others; an unwillingness to parade his feelings as a gay man in public. Thus, in films based on such early work as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke*, and *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, Williams's crypto-gayness found relief in the form of female guise: Blanche, Alma, Karen. These characters do express their creator's own "unacceptable" emotions as a gay man. They all do declare the nature of Williams's own fantasy life at the time of their creation. In them the artist has found a means of dealing with the tensions that plagued and defined him—tensions that reside in such dualities as flesh/spirit, promiscuity/pride, youth/(old) age.

Yet it is also true that such a strategy of survival in a hostile world constitutes an imaginative act of which any artist is capable. Most male artists, whatever their sexual orientation, assume the habit of it as a necessary qualification in dealing with female emotions. What one needs to be concerned about is not the *fact* of an artist's fantasies; but, rather, the way in which these fantasies are *shaped* so that they speak to and for other people.

Still, there remains the threat from certain critical quarters to reduce the whole of such problems of interpretation to generalities about the limitations of the gay artist. The central assumption of such criticism is that gays, generally, can know little of life as lived by those who take their place in the "real" world of straight, rather than gay, relationships. This point is most succinctly expressed by Adelaide Comerford, who, writing in *Films in Review*, claims that when Williams is not dealing with "sex degenerates or other psychopaths" his "ignorance of life is boringly patent."²⁰

This notion that the work of gay artists cannot be taken seriously because it deals with facts of feeling unknown to straights does have a certain awful logic to it.²¹ People insufficiently sensitive to those aspects of our situation which

give to an artist's work a measure of dignity surely cannot be expected to be open to the understandings that spring from our unique encounters with self and society. Those who malign or reject the existence of a gay sensibility will all too often overlook the fact that the feelings and creative productions of artists, gay or straight, are the sum total of their experiences—education, relationships, repressions, fortunes, and misfortunes—which have entered into their inner lives. To dismiss the creative efforts that spring from such influences on the ground that the artist is gay serves no useful purpose whatsoever. Certainly it is true enough that gays *do* develop a unique perception of the world, just as do all members of minority groups which have been treated, in essential respects, as marginal to society. And since sexuality can be divorced from no aspect of the inner workings of the human personality, it cannot be divorced from creativity. What one wants to know is this: Given the nature of our unique situation, what special insights does the gay artist have to offer?

In defining the gay sensibility it is important to remember that gays are members of a minority group, and that minorities have always constituted some sort of threat to the majority. Thus, gays have been regarded with fear, suspicion, and, even, hatred. The knowledge of these attitudes has developed in us what I have referred to above as a unique set of perspectives and understandings about what the world is like and how best we can deal with it. It is true that gay artists may at times protect themselves from the social pressures imposed upon them by our cultural contradictions and social prejudices. Hence, it may be that fantasies of revenge are sometimes transformed into art as a way of allowing vicarious play to erotic wishes renounced in the interests of social acceptance; resentments are expressed over treatment received; appeals for sympathy are made through the demonstration of damage wrought by continued injustice and oppression; psychic wounds are recorded so that art becomes, as Williams has said of his own work, "An escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable";²² female masks are donned; charades enacted; false identities assumed.

But are not such forms of expression—"deceptions"—in fact everywhere the rule? In Freud's formulation of the creative impulse, the artist is originally one who turns away from reality out of a refusal to come to terms with the demand for his or her renunciation of instinctual satisfactions, and who then, in fantasy life, allows full play to erotic and ambitious wishes.²³ Creativity is thus an inevitable outcome of repressed impulses or relationships. As such it constitutes a defiance against "unlived life."²⁴ True, the insights offered by so many of the female characters in Williams's films are the product of a gay sensibility. But then the gay artist is one who is graced with a double vision—a vision which belongs to all members of oppressed groups. Those on the outside better understand the activities of the insider than vice versa. As Benjamin

DeMott has pointed out in his essay, "But He's a Homosexual . . ." the gay artist often speaks more frankly than the straight on such matters as the tedium of marriage, the horrors of family life, the lover's exploitation of personality, and the slow erosion of character in promiscuity.²⁵

If we are not too rigid about drawing the line between thought and fantasy, but, rather, conceive of creative endeavor as encompassing a great range of covert mental processes, then it should be possible to view more sympathetically Williams's female creations as important both to the conservation and change of this artist's own sense of identity, as well as for what they reveal of an aspect of love that is neither gay nor straight, but, simply, human. These are facts of feeling which gays, who have early in life recognized irony in the incompatible demands of gayness and society, cannot easily avoid. Yet these are facts which can scarcely be understood by those oblivious to the peculiarities, past or present, of our situation in the general culture.

To say this is not to suggest that *only* gays can be objective about heterosexual institutions and arrangements. It is, rather, a way of saying that gays, because of the demands constantly made upon us to justify our existence, have never been able to simply accept, passively, the cultural assumptions that nongays may well take for granted.²⁶ The insights provided by, for example, the Deborah Kerr and Ava Gardner characters in *The Night of the Iguana*, are not those of "drag queens," as has been suggested. Rather, they spring from a gay sensibility that is not so completely identified with its "masculine" persona roles that it cannot give expression to its "feminine" component. It is also one that refuses to lapse into unthinking acceptance of what others have insisted is appropriate behavior for two people in love. When the Deborah Kerr character (Hannah Jelkes) speaks of her acceptance of the "impermanence" of relationships, Shannon (Richard Burton) chides her, offering up the metaphor of birds who build their nests "on the very highest level." To this Hannah quickly replies: "I'm not a bird, Mr. Shannon, I'm a human being. And when a member of that fantastic species builds a nest in the heart of another, the question of permanence isn't the first or even the last thing that's considered." Echoing these sentiments precisely, the Ava Gardner character (Maxine Faulk) tells Burton that sooner or later we all reach a point where it is important to "settle for something that works for us in our lives—even if it isn't on the highest kind of level." This is the message advocated time and again by the Williams female, and it is very much an insight of the gay sensibility.

Conclusion

Camp and the gay sensibility have rarely, if ever, been explored in relation to cinema.²⁷ On the rare occasions when it has (outside of gay periodicals) analy-

ses have tended to draw upon stereotypes of gayness with which we are all, by now, familiar. The term *camp* has been widely misused to signify the trivial, superficial, and "queer." The original meaning and complex associations of the term, some of which I have attempted to outline in this essay, are ignored. Thus, just as it has always been a sign of worthiness to speak out on behalf of any oppressed minority group *other* than gays, so, it seems, there exists a corresponding reluctance on the part of people who take the cinema seriously (either out of contempt, or of seeming suspect, or whatever) to perceive in camp a means of heightening their appreciation of any particular performance, film, or director.

Camp, as a product of the gay sensibility, has existed, right up to the present moment in time, on the same sociocultural level as the subculture from which it has issued. In other words, camp, its sources and associations, have remained secret in their most fundamental aspects, just as the actual life of gays in our culture has remained secret to the overwhelming majority of nongays. Many critics have, of course, appropriated the term *camp*, but without any understanding of its significance within the gay community. The subcultural attitudes, catalysts, and needs that have gone to produce camp as a creative expression of gay feelings are never considered. Yet camp is, in its essence, the expression of these feelings.

The real trouble with the usual speculations on what the critics have thought to term *camp* (aside from the fact that most of it is not) is that they never illuminate the gay sensibility, but, rather, go far to reinforce those very standards of judgment and aesthetic excellence which are often antithetical to it. It is thus that critics conclude, by implication, that camp has emerged from out of no intelligent body of sociocultural analysis.

To say this is not, however, to plead for the application of any narrow sociological analysis. Rather, it is a way of saying that the worth of camp can simply not be understood in critical terms unless some attention is first given to the attitudes that go to produce it—attitudes that spring from our social situation and that are crucial to the development of a gay sensibility.

Notes

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (London: Osgood, McIlvane & Co., 1891).
2. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Delta, 1967). This point and a number of other insights provided by Sontag in her seminal essay, "Notes on Camp," have been most helpful to me in formulating my own ideas on the subject.

3. This point is developed by R. V. Johnson in *Aestheticism* (London: Methuen, 1969).
4. Esther Newton has explored the relationship of costume to female impersonators in "The 'Drag Queen': A Study in Urban Anthropology" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1968). I am much indebted to Newton for her insights on the style and humor systems of "Drag Queens."
5. W. H. Auden in his "Introduction" to *The Intimate Journals of Charles Pierre Baudelaire*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (London: Methuen, 1949).
6. I have developed these ideas at greater length in "Passing for Straight: The Politics of the Closet," *Gay News*, no. 62 (January 1974).
7. David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975).
8. Erving Goffman discusses the "passing" strategy in relation to stigmatized groups in *Stigma: The Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963).
9. A. R. Thompson, *The Dry Mock: A Study of Irony in Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948).
10. Goffman, *Stigma*.
11. Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (London: Methuen, 1954).
12. Thomas Elsaesser, "A Cinema of Vicious Circles," in *Fassbinder*, ed. Tony Rayns (London: BFI, 1976).
13. See, for example, Robin Wood, *Personal Views: Exploration in Film* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976); and Andrew Sarris, in *The Films of Josef von Sternberg* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Doubleday, 1966), and "Summer Camp," *Village Voice*, 21 July 1975.
14. Wood, *Personal Views*.
15. Quoted in Herman Weinberg, *Josef von Sternberg: A Critical Study* (London: E. P. Dutton, 1967).
16. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" in *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: SEFT, 1973).
17. The *Memoirs of Tennessee Williams* (London: W. H. Allen, 1976) have also been useful to me here for the light they throw on the ways in which the author's gayness has affected his creative output.
18. The instances of critics labeling a Williams heroine "drag queen" are too numerous to cite. However, the most extended development of this particular line of interpretation can be found in Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973) and Elaine Rothchild in *Films in Review*, August/September 1964, where the reviewer speaks of Williams's "mal-formed females" and "anti-female" imagination; see also Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream* (New York: Avon, 1974); Foster Hirsch, "Tennessee Williams," in *Cinema* (USA) 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973); *The Guardian*, 27 October 1976; *Interview*, April 1973.
19. Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*.
20. Adelaide Comerford, *Films in Review*, December 1962.
21. Peter J. Dyer refers to the "difficulty" of taking the film *Summer and Smoke* "at all seriously," other than as "a case-book study in arrested development" (in *Monthly Film Bulletin* 29, no. 339); similarly, Molly Haskell in *From Reverence to Rape* writes: "Williams's women can be amusing company if we aren't asked to take them too seriously" (251).
22. Tennessee Williams in *New York Times*, 8 March 1959.
23. Sigmund Freud, "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming," *Collected Papers*, vol. 4 (New York: Basic Books, 1959).