Western narrative, a post-pioneer future that would come to erase his own native history after his culture and land had been transformed beyond all recognition. Instead of a rear-view mirrorism which wants to accelerate away from the past, such a reading would see its own historical fate prefigured in the mirror of another culture's future. Such a reading would draw conclusions from the lessons of other peoples' history rather than teach preachy lessons about the future to those who are judged to be living in the past.

5 Uses of Camp

"It's beige! My color!" (Elsie De Wolfe, on facing the Parthenon for the first time)

The best thing about subscribing to the National Enquirer is that it arrives in the mailbox the same day as the New York Review of Books. (John Waters)

Take four iconic moments from the sixties:

1961: In Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? (Robert Aldrich)—according to Bette Davis, the first "women's picture" for over ten years, bringing together for the first time the aging, uncrowned royalty of classic Hollywood, Davis and Joan Crawford—"Baby Jane" Hudson, ex-child-star, now grotesquely made-up (at Davis's own inspirational insistence) like a pantomime Ugly Sister, serves up steamed pet bird for lunch to her wheelchair-bound sister Blanche, a big film star in the thirties, whose career was tragically cut short by a car accident. Blanche spins in terror in her wheelchair, shot from above; Jane laughs from the belly up, her face twitching with glee. Their House of Usher-esque present refracts the Babylonish history of Hollywood stardom, while it creates a new horror film subgenre for the new decade.

1964: A different Baby Jane, in a New York photographer's studio in the year of the British Invasion—Baby Jane Holzer, in Tom Wolfe's "Girl of the Year," cavorting at her twenty-fourth birthday party which doubled as a publicity event for her star guests, the Rolling Stones. Back from the London "Pop" summer of 1963, sporting the Chelsea Look, and talking Cockney ("Anything beats being a Park Avenue housewife"), Holzer, for Wolfe, for Vogue, and for Andy Warhol, is the living symptom of the new, pluralistic, "classless" melting pot culture, where socialites—though not only the Social Register type—enthusiastically took up the styles and subcultural idioms of arriviste "raw-vital proles" (the party's theme was Mods vs. Rockers) by way of the exotic British import of "East End vitality" ("they're all from the working class, you know").

1969: The evening of the funeral of Judy Garland (a long time gay icon), members of the New York City Vice Squad come under fire, from beer cans, bottles, coins, and cobblestones, as they try to arrest some of the regulars at the Stonewall Inn in Christopher Street. The mood of the
protesters, many of them street queens in full drag, had changed from that of reveling in the spectacle of the arrest, even posing for it, to one of anger and rage, as one of the detainees, a lesbian, struggled to resist her arrest. Within minutes, the police were besieged within the burning bar. Some of those present thought they heard the chant “Gay Power,” while others only saw a more defiant than usual show of posing; it wasn’t clear whether this confrontation was “the Hairpin Drop Heard Around the World” or the “Boston Tea Party” of a new social movement.

Later in 1969: A different scene at the Altamont free festival, the dark sequel to and the Stones again. Jagger is up front, berobed and mascara’d, swishing, mincing, pouting, and strutting before a huge audience barely in check, while on every side of the stage are posted Hell’s Angels, confrontation dressers all—the sometime darlings of radical chic, which saw in them an aggressive critique of the counterculture’s “male impotence.” Here employed as soft police, they stare, disdainfully, at the effeminate Jagger, some of them mocking his turns and gyres, while the off-stage violence escalates, to end soon in the death of Meredith Hunter, caught on film in Gimme Shelter, the Stones’s blatant attempt at self-vindication, in which Jagger poses the rhetorical question: “Why does something always happen when we start to play that song?”—“Sympathy for the Devil.”

There are many sixties themes that could serve to link each of these highly mediated moments together: the spectacle of narcissism, radical chic, carnivalesque conflict, and so on. The purpose which they will serve here is to introduce particular aspects of the history of camp, that category of cultural taste, which shaped, defined, and negotiated the way in which sixties intellectuals were able to “pass” as subscribers to the throwaway Pop aesthetic, and thus as patrons of the attractive world of immediacy and disposability created by the culture industries in the postwar years. On the importance to the sixties of this category of taste, George Melly, the English jazz musician and Pop intellectual, is adamant: camp was “central to almost every difficult transitional moment in the evolution of pop culture. . . . [it] helped pop make a forced march around good taste. It brought vulgarity back into popular culture. . . .”

Beyond these few iconic moments, there is, of course, a much larger story to tell about the transitional function of camp as an operation of taste. It is a story of uneven development, because it demonstrates the different uses and meanings which camp generated for different groups, subcultures, and elites in the sixties. The exercise of camp taste raised different questions for gay people, before and after 1969; for gay males and for lesbians; for women, lesbian and straight, before and after the birth of the sexual liberation movements; for straight males, before and after androgynty had become legitimate; for traditional intellectuals, obliged now, in spite of their prejudices, to go “slumming,” and for more organic intellectuals, whose loyalty to the Pop ethic of instant gratification, expendability, and pleasure often seemed to leave no room for discriminations of value; for disadvantaged working-class subcultures whose relation to Pop culture was a glamorous semiotic of their aspirations and dreams of social mobility and leisure, and for the middle-class counterculture, whose adherents could afford, literally, to redefine the life of consumerism and material affluence as a life of spiritual poverty.

While it would be wrong to see camp as the privileged expression of any of these groups, even the pre-Stonewall, gay male subculture for which the strongest claim can be made, there are certain common conditions which must be stressed. Just as the new presence of the popular classes in the social and cultural purview of the postwar State had required a shift in the balance of contamination, so too, the reorganization of the culture industries, the new technologies and the new modes of distribution which accompanied that shift had yielded structural changes in the shape of aesthetic taste. New markets—the youth market and the swinging “Playboy” male in the fifties (to be followed by women in the sixties and gays in the seventies)—had generated massive changes in the patterns of consumption. Full employment, growing surplus value, and widely shared levels of material affluence provided a secure basis for the expressive leisure activities and the cultural risk-taking which characterized the sixties. In the writing of Tom Wolfe and others, the interlocking subcultures of the late fifties began to emerge as visible phenomena in the early years of the decade: “Practically nobody has bothered to see what these changes are all about. People have been looking at the new money since the war in economic terms only. Nobody will even take a look at our incredibly new national pastimes” among which Wolfe himself was to number stock car racing, demolition derbies, customized auto styling, surfing, the new teenage dance scenes, and many others.

To illustrate some of the specific effects of these changes in cultural technologies, I will take a closer look at the four iconic moments with which we began.

What triggers the narrative action in Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? and the newly heightened sadistic-jealous mood of Jane is the showing of one of Blanche’s old movies on television. The most recent version of Old Hollywood (a prelapsarian myth) was in decline, the star system had founded, and the whole industrial economy of the studio system had been challenged and largely outpaced by the television industry. The late fifties and early sixties saw the recirculation of classic Hollywood films on television, giving rise to a wave of revivalist nostalgia, and supplementing the cult of Hollywoodiana with all of the necrophilic trappings that
embellish its initiates' "sick" fascination with the link between glamour and death. No longer was this a taste reserved for members of film societies and clubs; or for avant-garde filmmakers like the celebrated Jack Smith, who had studied every frame of certain thirties films, and whose cult of Maria Montez, one of the most cherished of the pantheon of camp screen goddesses, was to irradiate important sectors of the early underground film scene. In Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?, this cult taste is exploited for the mainstream, as never before.

Of course, the stylized morbidity of this cult had long been an object of devotion for its aficionados. In Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard (1950), for example, Hollywood had produced its own sick and baroque elegy for silent film. Joe Gillis (William Holden), the young, down-on-his-luck scriptwriter and heel, recognizes the mark of movie history beneath the faded glamor of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson): "You used to be in silent pictures. You used to be big." Desmond shoots back: "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." In a sense Desmond is correct (in spite of Gillis's crass, authoritative voiceover, Norma is almost always correct), but her outrageous self-conceits and her tirades against "words," "writing," and "dialogue" can only produce their truly camp effect in a film, like Wilder's, which relies so heavily upon words and dialogue, and in which the new Hollywood—the "smallness" of today's pictures—is represented by the no-nonsense, professional earnestness of Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olson), a scriptreader who finds "social interest" themes to develop in the scripts of the noirish gigolo Gillis.

The camp meaning of Norma Desmond's grande dame theory is generated, then, by incongruously juxtaposing the technological environment of the present with the traumatic passing of silent film. In 1950, the studio star system, already in trouble, was about to enter its last phase—the Monroe phase. The anxiety of that moment is ironically figured in the other great camp film of that year, Joseph Mankiewicz's All About Eve, in which a young Monroe plays the role of a talentless ingenue hotly pursuing a career in one of the vacuums created by the retirement of a great Broadway actress (played by Bette Davis), just as the traditional hierarchy of prestige between Broadway and Hollywood is being expanded to include a third, and much despised third term—television (in the words of the film's theater critic, Addison De Witt: "That's all television is, my dear, nothing but auditions"). As Hollywood is passing out of its lavish "bourgeois" moment, the origins of that moment are invoked in Sunset Boulevard by the anachronistic spectacle of Norma Desmond, a gaudy survivor of the pre-bourgeois age of screen gods and goddesses, whose crumbling aristocracy now serves, in the fifties, as a displaced symptom of the current crisis in prestige of the film medium. It is the historical incongruity of this displacement which creates the world of irony that camp exploits.

Over a decade later, a similar play upon the displaced grandeur of the past, this time reinforced by the domesticity of the television environment, brings a sense of macabre tragicomedy to Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? But the conclusion of this film is even more incongruous yet. At the end of Sunset Boulevard, Norma Desmond gets to play her final, grandiose entrance in the garish, artificial light of camera flashes, where she basks in the knowledgeable attention of a crowd of reporters and voyeuristic Hollywood hangers-on who appreciate the scene, however bizarre, for what it's worth as a Hollywood publicity event. Eleven years later, Baby Jane Hudson strikes up her blithe child-star routine in the beach light of a California sun, surrounded by a puzzled group of teenagers for whom her appearance in that setting has about as much meaning as that of a visitor (to a beach party) from another planet.

The camp effect, then, is created not simply by a change in the mode of cultural production, but rather when the products (stars, in this case) of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste. Today's commercialized camp taste is exploited by the former Hollywood stars who star in television's own aristocratic soap operas, like Dynasty, The Colbys, and Falcon Crest (not to forget The Reagan Presidency). The camp taste of tomorrow, however, may be for the made-for-TV movies of the seventies and eighties, which seem so stale and flat to the eyes of today's tastemakers, but which may, one day, be seen in the retrospective light of their early, futile response to a more fully achieved cable and video revolution.

As for Baby Jane Holzer's Pop moment of the early sixties, a similar relation to disempowered modes of production can be seen there in the crucial importance of the "British invasion" to the redefinition of American taste. British Pop was the first evidence of a foreign culture making brilliant sense of the American popular culture which had been exported since the war. For Britons, the importation of American popular culture, even as it was officially despised, contained, and controlled, brought with it the refreshing prospect of a boycott of traditional European judgments of elitist taste. By the early sixties, the successes of this wave of American exports among the new "angry young" British tastemakers were such that they provided the final seal of approval for the formation and acceptance of Pop taste in the U.S. itself. Thus, the British version of Pop (always an imaginary relation to a foreign culture—James Hadley Chase, for example, invented the America of his many bestselling novels, after one short visit to Florida as a tourist) was somehow needed to legitimize American Pop for Americans, as if in accord with the higher canons of European taste to which Americans were still, in some way, obliged to defer.
The camp moment in this complex process, however, is the recognition of the eclipsed capacity of real British power to play the imperialist game of dominating foreign taste. That is why the British flag, for Mods and other subcultures, and Victoriana, for the Sergeant Pepper phase of the later sixties, became camp objects—precisely because of their historical association with a power that was now in decline. The Stars and Stripes, and most Americana, by contrast, could only be kitsch (gracelessly sincere), because they intend serious support for a culture that still holds real power in defining the shape of foreign tastes. It is quite symptomatic, then, that in Wolfe’s “Girl of the Year” the “supermarvellous” Holzer plays her part opposite a group of Cockney primitives, or Teen Savages, among whom Jagger is described as almost not human, “with his wet glib let lips,” forcing out a deformed language, a slurred, incomprensible “Bull Negro,” at least when he is not numbling away in a willfully inarticulate Cockney. At the very moment when the balance of transatlantic taste is being redefined, Wolfe, at least, found it ironically appropriate to turn on its head the kind of that recalls British colonial in the New World (elsewhere he describes the world of his “discovered” Californian subcultures as “Easter Island”—Who are these people and how did they achieve this level of civilization?).

Aside from this rewriting of the rules of the Old/New World game of taste, concrete relations to changes in cultural technology can be seen in the formation of Pop. The nouveau riche Holzer is crowned as “Girl of the Year” for her charisma, pep, and daring, and not on account of her youthful interpretation of traditional prestige, or some other inflection of accumulated cultural capital. So too, it is clear that the intellectuals who were creating and defining Pop tastes were organically associated not only with rising groups or classes, but also with the commercial industries themselves. In the mid-fifties, the International Group (Lawrence Alloway, John McHale, Reyner Banham, Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, Frank and Magda Cordell) at London’s Institute for Contemporary Art, responsible for most of the early theorization of Pop, was described by Banham, in class-marked terms, as “the revenge of the elementary schoolboys.” Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol all came out of the commercial art industries. Wolfe and the New Journalists like Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, and Terry Southern, retained their allegiance to the ethos of the journalistic world, flying in the face of the higher prestige of the literary world (Mailer and Truman Capote had ventured into the “new” journalism, but their debuts and their finales were, and are likely to be, literary ones). The new pop stars were, for the most part, from lower-class backgrounds, even when filtered through art school educations, as was the case with many of the British, or with Americans provided with respectable identities (on his show, Ed Sullivan presented Elvis as “a nice decent boy”). So too, the boutique revolution in design, distribution, and consumption brought about almost single-handedly by Mary Quant was a reflection of the need for a new youth style market for a fashion industry in the throes of reorganization.

But perhaps the most significant tastemaker of the day was David Bailey (the photographer who “created” Baby Jane Holzer along with three other “model girls”—no longer “fashion models”—in the summer of 1963), not least for his embodiment of the new kind of masculinity, described here by Melly:

uneducated but sophisticated; charming and louche; elegant but a bit grubby; the Pygmalion of the walking-talking dolly; foul-mouthed but sensitive; arbitrary yet rigid; the openly sardonic historian of his time elevating a narrow circle of his own friends and acquaintances into a chic but deliberately frivolous pantheon; hard-working but ruled by pleasure; ... he has transferred those qualities which, until the 60s, were thought of as essentially homosexual and made them available to what used to be known as “red-blooded males.”

In addition, Bailey’s transatlantic capacity to move from one sphere of Pop activity to another—fashion, rock, journalism, art—made him the model Renaissance courtier in a world where debutantes were beginning to swear like troopers, and learning to patronize the tastes and bodies of their chauffeurs.

But what was the meaning of this newly proclaimed “classless” culture? The purist Pop intellectual like Warhol simply proclaimed and celebrated that everyone (and everything) was equal: “It was fun to see the Museum of Modern Art people next to the teeny-boppers next to the amphetamine queens next to the fashion editors.” Others, like Wolfe, made assertive claims about the new cultural power of the disenfranchised—“now high style comes from low places ... the poor boys ... teenagers, bohos, camp culturati... have won by default”—and went on to emphasize the pioneering risks which writers like himself were taking in order to champion those who had neither “stature not grandeur,” among whom were “petty bureaucrats, Mafiosi, line soldiers in Vietnam, pimps, hustlers, doormen, socialites, shyster lawyers, surfers, bikers, hippies and other accursed Youth, evangelists, athletes, arriviste Jews” ... While for those, like Susan Sontag, with more orthodox avant-garde inclinations, the new egalitarianism meant a passport, from the top down (but not necessarily from the bottom up) to all corners of a cultural garden of earthly delights: “From the vantage point of this new sensibility, the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns, of a film by Jean–Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is of equal access.”
Each of these heady claims pays lip service, in its own way, to what had become the official national ideology of liberal pluralism, celebrating a heterogeneous range of special interest or status groups and subcultures, each pledged to harmonious co-existence. The noncommittal, if not always celebratory, stance of many Social intellectuals, while it was an important break with the morally charged paternalism of their Cold War forebears, did little to uncover what the liberal pluralist model had repressed—all of the signs of conflict generated by the uneven development of the “affluent society,” and the antagonism on the part of those groups, still oppressed by exclusion or marginalization by sex, color, and class, towards those who were especially privileged by the new pluralist conjuncture.

When Wolfe, for example, wrote about the new middle-class subcultures which he termed “statuspheres,” his was a straightforward, functionalist description of autonomous groups seeking their share of the pie; “they just want to be happy winners for a change.” No one was more brilliantly merciless on the topic of class and taste than Wolfe, and no one argued a stronger case for the crucial importance of popular pleasure in the new cultural conjuncture. But his characteristic refusal to read and interpret, within popular culture, the signs of dissatisfaction and resentment, let alone dissent or resistance, left him unwilling and ill-prepared to chronicle the less harmonious story of subcultural conflicts. In fact, as the decade wore on, the “lessons” of the sixties, which were increasingly about divisions and antagonisms, helped to confirm the New Left’s early rejection of consensus theory as a congratulatory liberal myth. Hence the frustration of Wolfe, and others, at the turn of events in the later sixties, when a law-and-order, or “control,” society was hurriedly being put in place to contain the anti-war movement and the Black, American Indian, and Chicano liberation struggles. Appearing at a symposium at Princeton with Paul Krassner, Gunter Grass, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Markopoulos, he was blithely puzzled by his fellow panelists’ talk of police repression, “the knock on the door,” and other strategies of coercion. “What are you talking about?,” he said, with only partial irony. “We’re in the middle of a Happiness Explosion.”

The shortcomings of the liberal pluralist model can be seen more clearly in the case of Altamont, where subcultures are set at odds with an expanded counterculture itself at odds with the straight consensus-bound world. For working-class cultures, the consumer ethic of immediate gratification had informed a grammar of achievement and mobility, which could yet be articulated as a hostile or delinquent response to the status quo. By contrast, the vocabulary of dissent mobilized by the middle-class counterculture drew upon an ideology of withdrawal or disaffiliation from the institutional responsibilities, powers, and privileges for which its college-educated initiates had been raised. The result, for the latter, was a fully articulate version of an alternative culture, with its own alternative structures in the areas of family, education, media, spiritual philosophy, lifestyle, and morality. Loosely aligned with, but often antagonistic towards the dominant white student fraction of the New Left (itself increasingly divided along lines of race and gender, and ultimately by sectarian political elements), the countercultural bloc found its inspirational energy upon a pantheon of expressive culture heroes—mostly rock stars—as part of its independent campaign to “elect” its own organic community leadership.

One highly visible feature of this campaign was a running battle, from the mid-sixties on, with the youth-oriented entertainment industries which sought to absorb, assimilate, and generate countercultural values for profit, and whose management of this process increasingly and logically demanded the celebrification and consent of rock stars as culture hero-leaders. The free music festival (usually planned and managed by astute young entrepreneurs) became a heroic symbol of this struggle, a test of the capacity to mobilize the liberated sectors of the population in support of a vast non-commercial celebration of the alternative culture.

At Altamont, which is often depicted, rightly or wrongly, as much less of a middle-class gathering than Woodstock or Monterey had been, the inept and callous planning of the festival as an end-of-tour publicity stunt for the Rolling Stones, the violence, associated with the “retarded masculinity” of the Hells Angels, and the “bad vibes,” associated with bad drugs and lack of medical aid, all came to be seen as a diabolic presage of a loss of control within the counterculture. In fact, it is important to see that the actions of the Angels, recruited by the Grateful Dead as alternative police, arose out of a different, working-class ethic of delinquency, which, unlike the countercultural disaffiliation, had never sought to devolve itself from the parent culture, and which retained its suspicion and resentment of the libertarian privileges of the student and other middle class groups. While they clearly found it offensive to be cast as police, and were right in thinking they were being patronized (no properly countercultural group would play this role), the Angels were just as likely to be found marching against the “unpatriotic” students (as happened infamously in Berkeley) and alongside the riot police, with whom they shared a common, if uneasy, class constituency. This antagonism, and these tensions, were symbolically reduced at Altamont to the frozen, iconic spectacle of the hardass Angel confronting the liberated camp masculinity of Jagger’s countercultural Devil.

At Stonewall, where a traditionally persecuted group fought back and made history, but not under conditions of its own making, a more clear-cut picture of the control society of consumer capitalism emerges. The
immediate local problem in the Stonewall “riots” was as much illicit Mafia control of gay bars as the routine acts of police repression. Thus, the commercial control of the gay subculture, which existed hitherto as a network of codes of concealment, was already an issue in the founding moment of the movement that was soon to emerge under the aegis of Gay Pride, Gay Power, and the Gay Liberation Front. Gay leaders contended that the liberation movement’s creation of a gay culture had to consist in more than simply placing gay businessmen in control of the bars, stores, and clubs; alternative institutions had to be created. The success of the lesbian community in creating such a network of institutions (along with its achievements in forming the vanguard of feminist politics) is often seen as the most positive legacy of the pre-AIDS phase of the movement.

In the post-Stonewall years, gay males emerged as one of the prime targets, cachet groups that was ripe for new consumer marketing in the early seventies. The result was a thriving sexual marketplace where the advancement of sexual freedoms was often inseparable from the commodification of sex itself. The gay male became a model consumer, in the vanguard of the business of shaping and defining taste, choice, and style for mainstream markets. On the one hand, then, the libertarian ethos of the sexual marketplace helped in part to protect the sexual freedoms that were partially achieved by the liberation movements. On the other hand, the commercial categorizing of sexual identities made it easier to socially control and “quarantine” groups identified by sexual orientation. Marcuse’s warnings about the “repressive tolerance” of consumer capitalism resonated within the gay liberation movement: the technical rationality of capitalism had found ways of administrating and exploiting the liberalization of attitudes towards sexual pleasure.

It is in this dialectic between personal liberation and corporate-State regulation (of medical technologies, etc.) that gay intellectuals locate the problems faced today in a control society reinforced by the newfound capacity to define the “threat” of AIDS on its own terms. How does a subculture make sense of this dialectic in terms of cultural politics? Perhaps this is where the question of camp, which was often posed as an embarrassment to post-Stonewall gay culture (“the Stepin Fetchit of the leather bars”), becomes political all over again, because camp contains an explicit commentary on feats of survival in a world dominated by the taste, interests, and definitions of others.

Camp Oblige

In her seminal essay, “Notes on Camp” (1964), Susan Sontag raises the question of survival in a quite specific way: “Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in an age of mass culture.” Her formula suggests that what is being threatened in an age of mass culture is precisely the power of tastemaking intellectuals to influence the canons of taste, and that the significance of the “new sensibility” of camp in the sixties is that it presents a means of salvaging that privilege. (The term “dandy,” here, can be seen as standing for intellectuals who are either personally devoted to the sophistries of taste, or whose intellectual work it is to create, legitimize, and supervise canons of taste.)

The pseudo-aristocratic patrilineage of camp can hardly be understated. Consider the etymological provenance of the three most questionable categories of American cultural taste: schlock, kitsch, and camp. None are directly of Anglo origin, and it is clear, from their cultural derivation, where they belong on the scale of prestige: Schlack, from Yiddish (literally, “damaged goods” at a cheap price), Kitsch, from German, petty bourgeois for pseudo-art, and Camp, more obscurely from the French se camper (to posture or to flaunt), but with a history of English upper-class usage. While schlock is truly unpretentious—nice, harmless things—and is designed primarily to fill a space in people’s lives and environments, kitsch has serious pretensions to artistic taste, and, in fact, contains a range of references to high or legitimate culture which it apes in order to flatter its owner-consumer. Kitsch’s seriousness about art, and its aesthetic chutzpah is usually associated with the class aspirations and upper mobility of a middlebrow audience, insufficient in cultural capital to guarantee access to legitimate culture.

Of course, kitsch is no more of a fixed category than either schlock or camp. These categories are constantly shifting ground, their contents are constantly changing; as is the case with “midcult,” which is promoted one year may be relegated down again the next. Neither can they be regarded as categories defined with equal objectivity but attributed different value, since schlock and kitsch are more often seen as qualities of objects, while camp tends to refer to a subjective process: camp, as Thomas Hess put it, “exists in the smirk of the beholder.” If certain objects tend to be associated with camp more readily than others, they are often described as “campy,” suggesting a self-consciousness about their status which would otherwise be attributed to the smirking beholder. Sontag downgrades this self-consciousness as too deliberate, reserving her praise for the category of naive camp, perhaps because, with the latter, it is the critic and not the producer who takes full credit for discerning the camp value of an object or text. So too, the line between kitsch and camp partially reflects a division of audience labor between, in camp terminology, ignorati and cognoscenti. The producer or consumer of kitsch is likely to be unaware of the extent to which his or her intentions or pretensions are reified and alienated in the kitsch object
itself. Camp, on the other hand, involves a celebration, on the part of
cognoscenti, of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the
very process by which hitherto unexpected value can be located in some
obscure or exorbitant object.

But if camp, in this respect, has always been part of the history of
pseudo-aristocratic taste, the “moment” of camp, in the sixties, was also
seen as a democratic moment, and its influence continues to irradiate pop
attitudes today. What were the conditions under which this democratizing
influence came about?

To properly historicize that moment, we must first recognize that just
as it is absurd to speak of a lasting canon or pantheon of camp texts,
objects, and figures (though more or less definitive lists do exist for
certain groups who use camp), universal definitions of camp are rarely
useful. In Philip Core’s encyclopedia of camp, for example, camp is
loosely defined as “the lie that tells the truth” (after Jean Cocteau) or as
“the heroism of people not called upon to be heroes,” while Christopher
Isherwood, in The World in the Evening (1954), finds that camp is a subject-
ive matter of “expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun
and artifice and elegance.” This is why Sontag chose to write her essay
about this “fugitive sensibility” in the more objective form of notes or
jottings, for fear of writing a dry, definitive treatise that would itself be
nothing but “a very inferior piece of camp.” It appears, however, that
she also wanted to avoid the argument that camp is a “logic of taste,” with
explicable, historical conditions; the determining grounds of taste, she
prefers to say, are “almost, but not quite, ineffable.”

More useful in this respect is Mark Booth’s expanded and exhaustive
account of Sontag’s “pocket history of camp” (her note no. 14—embracing
rococo, mannerism, les précieux, Yellow Book aestheticism, art nou-
veau, etc.), a history polemically guided by his thesis that “to be camp is
to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment
greater than the marginal merits.” The advantage of Booth’s formulation
is that it helps to define camp in relation to the exercise of cultural
power at any one time. Booth argues, for example, that, far from being
a “fugitive” or “ineffable” sensibility, camp belongs to the history of the
“self-presentation” of arriviste groups. Because of their marginality, and
lack of inherited cultural capital, these groups parody their subordinate
or uncertain social status in “a self-mocking abdication of any pretensions
to power.”

Unlike the traditional intellectual, whose function is to legitimize the
cultural power of ruling interests, or the organic intellectual, who pro-
motes the interests of a rising class, the marginal, camp intellectual ex-
presses his impotence as the dominated fraction of a ruling bloc at the
same time as he distances himself from the conventional morality and
taste of the ascendant middle class. For example, the nineteenth-century
camp intellectual can be seen as a parody or negation of dominant bour-
geois forms: anti-industry, pro-idleness; anti-family, pro-bachelorhood;
anti-respectability, pro-scandal; anti-masculine, pro-feminine; anti-sport,
pro-frivolity; anti-decor, pro-exhibitionism; anti-progress, pro-deca-
dence; anti-wealth, pro-fame. But his aristocratic affectations are increas-
ingly a sign of his disqualification, or remoteness from power, because they
comfortably symbolize, to the bourgeoisie, the declining power of the
foppish aristocracy, while they are equally removed from the threatening,
embryonic power of the popular classes.

Hitherto associated with the high culture milieu of the theater, the
camp intellectual becomes an institution, in the twentieth century, within
the popular entertainment industries, reviving his (and by now, her) role
there as the representative or stand-in for a class that is no longer in a
position to exercise its power to define official culture. As part of that
role, he maintains his parodic critique of the properly educated and
responsibly situated intellectual who speaks with the requisite tone of
moral authority and seriousness as the conscience and consciousness of
society as whole.

In this respect, it is appropriate that Sontag chooses to link her account
of the (largely homosexual) influence of camp taste with the intellectual
successes of “Jewish moral seriousness,” as the two “pioneering forces of
modern sensibility” (note no. 51). More than any other publication, her
essay (and the book in which it appeared, Against Interpretation) signaled
the challenge, in the sixties, to the tradition of Jewish moral seriousness
that had governed the cultural crusading of the Old Left and Cold War
liberalism. Not that Sontag is willing to jettison entirely the prerogative
of moral discrimination; in fact, she is careful to record her ambivalence
about camp—“a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.” Nonetheless,
the importance of her own critical intervention in the mid-sixties was in
the service of pleasure and eroticism, and against judgment, truth, seriousness,
and interpretation: against, in short, the hermeneutics of depth and
discrimination through which the New York Intellectuals had filtered
extra-curricular literary taste since the war. As for the academic New
Critics, whose “Christian” moral seriousness was the more hegemonic
literary force, Sontag’s flight from sincerity was almost too far outside of
their orbit to register immediate effects and responses.

In the U.K., camp was more directly a parodic reorganization, on
the part of lower-class upstarts, of the taste of the traditionally “effete”
aristocracy of the cultural Establishment. Camp in the U.S., at the mo-
moment that Sontag immortalized it, was an important break with the style
and legitimacy of the old liberal intellectuals, whose puritanism had
always set it apart from the frivolous excesses of the ruling class. To fully
understand this shift in style, it is necessary to look at the two most important contexts of this break: first, Pop, and its reorientation of attitudes towards mass-produced culture; and second, the culture of sexual liberation, for which camp played a crucial role in the redefinition of masculinity and femininity.

**Pop Camp**

In London in the mid-fifties, the fledgling studies of Pop by the intellectuals of the International Group had come directly out of the postwar debates about mass culture. In contrast to the “mass culture” critique of manipulation, standardization, and lobotomization, Reyner Banham and others argued that there was no such thing as an “unsophisticated consumer”25: the consumers of popular culture were experts, trained to a high degree of connoisseurship in matters of consumer choice and consumer use. Lawrence Alloway wrote passionately against the conventional wisdom that mass culture produced a passive, undifferentiated audience of dupes:

We speak for convenience about a mass audience but it is a fiction. The audience today is numerically dense but highly diversified. Just as the wholesale use of subversion techniques in advertising is blocked by the different perception capacities of the members of any audience, so the mass media cannot reduce everybody to one drugged faceless consumer. Fear of the Amorphous Audience is fed by the word “mass.” In fact, audiences are specialized by age, sex, hobby, occupation, mobility, contacts, etc. Although the interests of different audiences may not be rankable in the curriculum of the traditional educationist, they nevertheless reflect and influence the diversification which goes with increased industrialization.26

In the drab culture climate of Britain in the fifties, popular culture and mass media were much more than a functional and necessary guide to modern living; they were, in Alloway’s eloquent phrase, “a treasury of a manual of one’s occupancy of the twentieth century.” To the paternalist Establishment culture, they represented the ugly specter of “Americanization.” To working-class kids, they brought a taste of glamour, affluence, the immediate experience of gratification, and the dream of a pleasure-filled environment. Here, for example, is Ray Gosling’s childhood memoir: “There was a tremendous romance about America. America was the place where we all wanted to be. America was closer than London. . . . The most exciting thing about being alive was looking at Americans.”67 To mature intellectual aficionados, American popular culture was a Cockaigne of the perversive intellect, a fantasy of taste turned upside-down with which to avenge themselves against the tweedy sponsors of European tradition. The very idea of Richard Hamilton’s painting “Hommage à Chrysler Corp.,” for example, exudes the bittersweet flavor of camp—a highly wrought conceit of the European as a fake American.

While the American experience of commercial, popular culture was, of course, much more lived and direct, we should not fall into the trap of assuming that it was less mediated or less fantastic. The uses made of comic strips, science fiction, “Detroit” styling, Westerns, rock ‘n’ roll, advertising, etc. by different social groups cannot be read as if they were spontaneous responses to real social conditions. On the contrary, they represent an imaginary relation to these conditions, and one which is refracted through the powerful lens of the so-called American Dream—a pathologically seductive infusion of affluence, sublimated ordinariness and achieved utopian pleasure. The American as a dream American.

For intellectuals, the espousal of Pop represented a direct affront to those who governed the boundaries of official taste. Roy Lichtenstein, for example, expressly chose to use commercial art as subject matter in his painting because “the one thing everyone hated was commercial art.”28 The slick, surface “newness” of the subject matter of Pop Art was in contrast to the tactile “junkiness” of the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who had made the first important break with the high modernist aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism. Pop’s commitment was to the new and the everyday, to throwaway disposability, to images with an immediate impact but no transcendent sustaining power. It is important, then, to consider that Pop, in its various cultural forms, did not emerge out of “problematics” in each of the fields of painting, literature, music, theater, or design; in other words, as a new “movement” in each of these fields. Pop arose out of problematizing the question of taste itself, and, in its more purist forms, was addressed directly to the media processes through which cultural taste is defined and communicated. Not only did it deny the imposition, from above, of seemingly arbitrary boundaries of taste, but it also questioned the distanced contemplation, interpretive expertise, and categories of aesthetic judgment which accompanied that imposition. Nothing could be more execrable to a tradition of taste that was founded on the precepts of “universality,” “timelessness,” and “uniqueness” than a culture of obsolescence: i.e. specifically designed not to endure.

So too, nothing could be more provocative to an ideology of authorship that celebrated angst-ridden, heroic subjectivism than the impassive demeanor of Pop “cool”—as immune to the existentialist cult of alienation as it was to the ethos of communitarian togetherness which was to govern
the style of the counterculture. In principle, Pop "cool" was neither exactly complicit or dissenting, since it was based on an outright refusal of the act of judgment. If it was a stance that seemed to be little different from the spirit of entrepreneurial laissez-faire, it also ought to be seen in its fine art context, where the refusal of judgmental sincerity coupled with the studied acceptance of a vernacular language could only be seen as a heresy. In fact, Pop's doctrinal rejection of the elitist past was best played out, not with dadaist zeal, but with an attitude of pure indifference. This, of course, was an added insult to the consensus of responsible intellectual opinion which avowed that a truly democratic, classless culture could only be brought about by way of struggle, and through the hard school of educating mass consciousness. To that consensus of opinion, a truly democratic culture was unrecognizable in any other form, least of all in Pop's easygoing attitudes towards an already existing, non-utopian environment.

Camp, however, offered a negotiated way by which this Pop ethos could be recognized by more sceptical intellectuals. In fact, Pop camp, as Melly argues, is a contradiction in terms, because camp is the "in" taste of a minority elite, while Pop, on the other hand, was supposed to declare that everyday cultural currency had value, and that this value could be communicated in a simple language. Pop's materials were already there, to be enjoyed or to be read as a stylish commentary on everyday life, not prescribed like a dose of medicine for some better, or utopian future by those with the cultural capital to do so ("we know what's good for you").

How then did this egalitarian spirit come to be redefined in an elitist way? The first reason is that everyday life had to be "discovered." Just as "folk America" had to be discovered by intellectuals who went on the road in the depression years, so "Pop America" came as an ethnographic revelation, for those like Wolfe, ever in search of new Easter Islanders, or Warhol, here on his way to California for the first time:

The farther west we drove, the more Pop everything looked on the highways. Suddenly we all felt like insiders because even though Pop was everywhere—that was the thing about it, most people still took it for granted, whereas we were dazzled by it—to us, it was the new Art. Once you "got" Pop, you could never see a sign the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again. . . . I didn't ever want to live anywhere where you couldn't drive down the road and see drive-ins and giant ice-cream cones and walk-in hot dogs and motel signs flashing."

"Thinking Pop" was supposed to be devoid of the nostalgia that usually absorbed intellectuals faced with the task of re-educating themselves in
the everyday life of ordinary people. But the ethos of discovery inevitably brought with it the tropes of appropriation, one-upmanship, and collector chic which had little to do with the immediate, hedonistic use of a reliable, processed environment that Pop had initially sought to valorize.

Second, Pop could no more shut out history than the sublime Coke bottle could escape its future as an empty but returnable commodity item. Consumption of the immediate, self-sufficient Pop experience already contains the knowledge that it will soon be outdated, spent, obsolescent, or out of fashion. A throwaway culture, moreover, is not one which simply disappears once its most popular contents have been consumed. Whether its discontents figure as waste to be recycled, as non-biodegradable plastic, or as the detritus of fashion, to lie in wait until they are tastefully redeemed twenty years hence, it contains messages about the historical production of the material conditions of taste. This knowledge about history is the precise moment when camp takes over, because camp involves a rediscovery of history’s waste. Camp, in its collector mode, retrieves not only that which had been initially excluded from the serious high cultural tradition, but also the more unsalvageable material that had been picked over and left wanting by purveyors of the “antique.” For the camp liberator, as with the high modernist, history’s waste matter becomes all too available as a “ragbag,” not drenched with tawdriness by the mock-heroism of Waste Land irony, but irradiated, this time around, with the glamor of resurrection. In liberating the objects and discourses of the past from disdain and neglect, camp generates its own kind of economy. Camp, in this respect, is the re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor.

By the late sixties, when the crossover appeal of camp was well established, this parasitical practice had become a survivalist way of life for the counterculture, whose patronage of flea markets was a parody, made possible by post-scarcity consciousness, of the hand-me-down working-class culture of the rummage sale. The flea market ethos, like many countercultural values, paid its respects to a modernist notion of prephilosopherian authenticity. In an age of plastic, authentic material value could only be located in the “real” textures of the preindustrial past, along with traces of the “real” labor that once went into fashioning clothes and objects. By sporting a whole range of peasant-identified, romantic-proletarian, and exotic non-Western styles, students and other initiates of the counterculture were confronting the guardians (and the workaday prisoners) of commodity culture with the symbols of a spent historical mode of production, or else one that was “Asiatic” and thus “underdeveloped.” By doing so, they signaled their complete disaffiliation from the semiotic codes of contemporary cultural power. In donning gypsy and denim, however, they were also taunting the current aspirations of those
social groups for whom such clothes called up a long history of poverty, oppression, and social exclusion. And in their maverick Orientalism, they romanticized other cultures by plundering their stereotypes.

The earlier phase of Pop camp arose directly out of the theatrical encounter of a culture of immediacy with the experience of history's amnesia. In reviving a period style, or elements of a period style that were hopelessly, and thus safely, dated, camp acted as a kind of memento mori, a reminder of Pop's own future oblivion which, as I have argued, Pop contains within itself. But camp was also a defense against the decease of the traditional panoply of tastemaking powers which Pop's egalitarian mandate had threatened. Camp was an antidote to Pop's promised contagion of obsolescence. It is no surprise, then, to find that Sontag had been researching an essay on death and morbidity before she decided to write "Notes on Camp." The switch, in her mind from thinking about "mortuary sculpture, architecture, inscriptions and other such wistful lore" to the sociability of camp wit was perhaps triggered by a quite understandable flight from the realms of chilled seriousness to the warmer climate of theatrical humor and gaiety. But it is also symptomatic, I think, of the necrophilic economy which underpins the camp sensibility, not only in its amorous resurrection of deceased cultural forms, but also in its capacity to promise immortality to the tastemaking intellect.

When Sontag associates the camp sensibility with the principle of "the equivalence of all objects" (note no. 47), she is making claims for its "democratic spirit." What Sontag means, however, is that camp declares that anything, given the right circumstances, could, in principle, be redeemed by a camp sensibility. Everything thereby becomes fair game for the camp cognoscenti to pursue and celebrate at will. This is a different thing from the democratic, "no-brow" proposition of Pop philosophy, which simply accepts or complies with, rather than exploits, the principle of general equivalence. Sontag no doubt acknowledges this difference when she characterizes Pop as "more flat and more dry" ("ultimately nihilistic") than Camp, and when she describes Camp, by contrast, as "tender," "passionate," and nurtured "on the love that has gone into certain objects and personal styles" (notes 55-56).

There was a darker, and more gruesome side to this economy of passion, however, and it can be seen best embodied in the category of bad taste—Sontag's formulation of "the ultimate Camp statement; it's good because it's awful"—which, in the course of two decades, has come much closer to being recognized as a semi-legitimate cultural expression, if only because it has become a thriving market in its own right. There is no question that Camp's initial patronage of bad taste was as much an assault on the official canons of taste as Pop's eroticization of the everyday had been. But bad taste was by no means a clean break with the logic of cultural capital, for it must also be seen from the point of view of those whom it indirectly patronized, especially those lower middle-class groups whom, historically, have had to bear the stigma of "failed" taste. The objet retrouvé of camp's bad taste could hardly shake off its barbaric associations with the social victimization of its original taste-audience. Today, this process of camp rehabilitation is the basis of a vast and lucrative sector of the culture industry devoted to the production of "exploitation" fare. If the pleasure generated by bad taste presents a challenge to the mechanisms of control and containment that operate in the name of good taste, it is often to be enjoyed only at the expense of others, and this is largely because camp's excess of pleasure has very little, finally, to do with the (un)controlled hedonism of a consumer; it is the result of the (hard) work of a producer of taste, and "taste" is only possible through exclusion and depreciation.

The commercialization of camp/bad taste has run its course from the novels of Ronald Firbank to the nostalgia cable TV reruns of The Donna Reed Show; from the Beardsley period of the Yellow Book to exploitation publications like the Weekly World News and the National Enquirer. One important turning point was the television remake of Batman in the mid-sixties. Everyone "knew" about Batman and Robin, a fact that spoilt the jokes for the few. Pop camp reached its apotheosis in Roger Vadim's luxurious 1968 comic strip-based film Barbarella (with its gorgeous fur-lined spaceship, and the kinky naiveté of its occupant, played by Jane Fonda), while the various parodies of James Bond movies exploited the hi-tech improbabilities of popular British spy culture.

1970 was the year that Hollywood fully caught up, with a trilogy of movies that featured what many cognoscenti came to see as the decadent, and not the vibrant, spirit of camp. Michael Sarne's much hyped Myra Breckinridge, based on Gore Vidal's entertaining novel, was a tired, laconic treatment of the gay camp fascination with Hollywoodiana, and it evoked a wave of scorn among critics for Rex Reed/Raquel Welch's dual portrayal of transsexualism. Beyond the Valley of the Dolls overexposed the keen glutony of Russ Meyer's earlier exploitation skin flicks like The Immoral Mr. Teas, Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!, and Vixen, while Roger Ebert's gilded-trash script for this most synthetic of movies demonstrated how camp deliberately aspires, as Mel Brooks put it, to "rise below vulgarity." Countercultural camp finally got a run for its money in Nicholas Roeg's Performance which brought together the working-class criminal subculture and the experimental rock avant-garde within the hallucinogenic milieu of an extended bad trip. In the artificial paradise of his house of pleasure and pretension, Mick Jagger's retired polysexual star, Turner (rock culture's Norma Desmond) acts out his liberated middle-class role—"Personally, I just perform"—to James Fox's confused Chas, his class
opposite in masculinity, for whom "performance" is a category of work and not a way of life.

Each of these films was also a self-conscious attempt to produce a film with "cult movie" status, and thus to cash in on a ritual taste for the offbeat which had grown to considerable commercial dimensions by the end of the sixties. More successful was Jim Sharman's 1974 The Rocky Horror Picture Show, based on Richard O'Brien's play, an outrageous tongue-in-cheek tribute to the cult spectrum of late night picture shows—a trashy brew of B movie, schlitz sci-fi, and junky horror productions. Rocky Horror became the queen of the midnight movie circuit, with its own ritualized audience subculture. Other cult favorites on the circuit include dozens culled from the gore factory of Roger Corman's New World Pictures, the full complement of George Romero horror films, from Night of the Living Dead (1968) onwards, and the low-budget charms of the rediscovered Ed D. Wood, Jr., whose prolific fifties output of films like the pro-transvestite Glen or Glenda? (1952) and the anti-militarist Plan 9 from Outer Space (1956) (featuring the all-time star camp cast of Tor Johnson, a 400 pound Swedish ex-wrestler; Criswell, the famous TV psychic; Vampira, as the mute, wasp-waisted ghoul woman; and a fading, stumbling Bela Lugosi in his last screen appearance) continues to posthumously earn him the top awards on the Golden Turkey circuit of best "bad films." 35

The most devoted interpreter of bad taste, however, has been the Baltimore film director John Waters, whose celebration of glamarized sleaze and trashola in films like Mondo Trasho (1969), Multiple Maniacs (1970), Pink Flamingos (1973), Female Trouble (1974), and Polyester (1981) is so tied to regional and "white trash" class specificity that its interest, if not its ever-ambiguous appeal, transcends the reëphrasing of genre and stereotype that characterizes the more standard exploitation products. Only Waters would be capable of brilliantly confessing, in the most complete inversion of taste possible, to the guilty pleasure he experiences in watching art films:

Being a Catholic, guilt comes naturally. Except mine is reversed. I blab on ad nauseam about how much I love films like Dr. Butcher, M.D. or My Friends Need Killing, but what really shames me is that I'm also secretly a fan of what is unfortunately known as the "art film." Before writing this sentence, I've tried to never utter the word "art" unless referring to Mr. Linkletter. But underneath all my posing as a trash film enthusiast, a little known fact is that I actually sneak off in disguise (and hope to God I'm not recognized) to arty films in the same way business men rush in to see Fussy Talk on their lunch hour. I'm really embarrassed. 35

In films like Eraserhead (1978) and Blue Velvet (1986), David Lynch has refurbished the more respectable side of the avant-garde cultivation of camp for crossover Hollywood consumption. On the other side of the taste divide, the popular market in hard-core porn, horror, gore, and splatter movies has entered a boom period in the last fifteen years as censorship laws have eased off. Today, the most advanced forms of bad taste vanguardism are located in a loosely defined nexus of cultish interests that have grafted the most anti-social features of "sick" humor on to an attenuated paranoia about the normality of the straight world. It covers particular obsessions with conspiracy theories (especially around the Kennedy assassination), bodily disorders and etiologies, religious cult tracts, mass murderer folklore, the psychopathology of atrocities, and exotic rituals, tribal practices, and bizarre customs as described in bogus ethnographic literature or in Mondo Cane (1963), the original Mondo film. There is a thin line between the sophisticated irony of this taste for the bizarre and the deeper, popular currents of involvement in the "cults" that have flourished within, alongside, and in and of the wake of the New Age movements—pseudo science (the paranormal, spontaneous human combustion, geocentrism, flying saucer contacteeism), pseudo religion (channeling, Space Jesii, breatharians, sub-Mormonism), weird politics (Is Hitler Alive? Is He Hiding the UFO Secret?), and other crankish excursions onto unorthodox cultural terrain. 35

From an institutional point of view, camp has become the resident conscience of a "bad film" subculture which has its own alternative circuit of festivals, promoters, heroes, stars, and prizes. Cognoscenti savor the work of directors like Ed D. Wood, Jr., Herschell Gordon Lewis, and Ray Dennis Steckler, while those with speciality tastes champion genres like biker films, nudist camp films, beach party films, industrial jeopardy films, women in prison films, and the like. 36 Although it is specifically a low budget subculture, with considerable returns at stake nonetheless, it increasingly feeds off Hollywood's own recognition of the cost of its failures in the taste trade, and is thereby tied into the economic rhythms of the industry.

"Bad film" buffs are expected to know, moreover, that their taste is a product of the labor of leisure. In their preface to The Golden Turkey Awards, a semi-official organ of the bad film circuit, Harry and Michael Medved indirectly pay tribute to this work ethic when they compare their pursuit of bad films to the mystic:

who climbed the walls of his town, day after day, staring off toward the horizon. He explained to his friends that he had to be there in order to await the arrival of the Messiah.

"But don't you get tired of it?" they wanted to know.
"Sure," he answered, "But it's steady work." 37
The camp value of these films is tied to a productivist ethic of labor, and to those for whom culture, even entertainment, has therefore to be "worked" at to produce meaning. Consequently, bad taste tends to be the preserve of urban intellectuals (professional and pre-professional) for whom the line between work and leisure time is occupationally indistinct, and is less regulated by the strict economic divide between production and consumption which governs the cultural tastes of lower middle-class and working-class groups. But while the taste for schlock has increasingly become a trademark of the postmodernist style of the yuppie class—the original "TV generation"—it has also spread, through the agency of late night television (The David Letterman Show), cable (MTV especially) and home video, well beyond its metropolitan force field into the heartlands, where young refugees from family morality have fashioned their sense of alienation out of the benign innocence of shopping mall culture (Chopping Mall!, 1986) just as their forebears made a cult out of "educational" films like Reefer Madness (1936), or the J.D. "problem" films of the fifties, like Reform School Girls.

If, however, we want to look at the effect on mainstream popular taste, then it is in the realm of performance rock that camp's penchant for the defiant has crossed over the threshold of restricted consumption into the mass milieux of homes, schools, colleges, clubs, and workplaces all over the country. For its teenage consumers, the outrageousness of performance rock has, among other things, always been something of a family affair—the object of what teenagers (and record company producers) imagine is every good parent's worst fantasy. It is almost impossible, then, to talk about the history of that ever shifting pageant of eroticized spectacle—from Elvis's gyrating hips to Annie Lennox's gender-blurred sangfroid, from the suggestive body language of Little Richard to the outrageous adult presence of Grace Jones, and the almost metaphysical, polysexual identities of Prince and Michael Jackson—without first discussing camp's influence on the changing social definitions of masculinity and femininity from the late fifties onwards.

Prisoners of Sex?

Female and male impersonation, representations of androgyny, and other images of gender-blurring have all played an important historical role in cinema's creation of our stockpile of social memories. For the spectator, whose voyeuristic captivity (as captors and prisoners) of the cinema image can be read as an eroticized response to a psychic scenario on the screen, the suggestive incidence of cross-dressing among those memories is a provocative area of study. It has proved notoriously difficult, however, to provide a systematic account of how "masculine" and "feminine" positions of spectatorship are assumed as part of the process of reading and responding to these ambiguous images.98

Molly Haskell has argued that the overwhelming disparity of images of female to male impersonation in films can be explained by the fact that, historically, male impersonation is seen as a source of power and aggrandizement for women, while the theatrical adoption of female characteristics by men is seen as a process of belittlement. Male impersonation is serious and erotic, while female impersonation is simply comical.99

In her book about cross-dressing in Hollywood cinema, Rebecca Bell-Metereau argues that Haskell's serious/comical distinction no longer applies to the whole range of female impersonations of "women of power" which have appeared over the last two and a half decades. So too, she argues that in the pre-1960 examples, "tragic" or "comic" readings of a film's treatment of cross-dressing are not simply the result of gender alignment. More important is whether or not the male or female imitation is "willingly performed and sympathetically accepted by the social group within the film."100

Just as the reading of these images is inflected between the film's spectacle of transgressive display and its narrative of social judgment, there is no guarantee that what is encoded in these film scenarios will be decoded in the same way by different social groups with different sexual orientations. This is nowhere more obvious than in the highly developed gay subculture that evolved around a fascination with classical Hollywood film and, in particular, with film stars like Judy Garland, Bette Davis, Mae West, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford (and performers like Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler, Diana Ross, Donna Summer, Grace Jones, and many other disco divas). Denied the possibility of "masculine" and "feminine" positions of spectatorship, and excluded by conventional representations of male-as-hero or narrative agent, and female-as-image or object of the spectacle, the lived spectatorship of gay male and lesbian subcultures is expressed largely through imaginary or displaced relations to the straight meanings of these images and discourses of a parent culture.

Unlike the histories of Pop and camp which I have discussed, the gay camp fascination with Hollywood has much less to do with transformations of taste. In its pre-Stonewall heyday (before "gay" was self-affirming), it was part of a survivalist culture which found, in certain fantastic elements of film culture, a way of imaginatively communicating its common conquest of everyday oppression. In the gay camp subculture, glamorous images culled from straight Hollywoodiana were appropriated and used to express a different relation to the experience of alienation and
exclusion in a world socially polarized by fixed sexual labels. Here, a tailored fantasy, which never "fits" the real, is worn in order to suggest an imaginary control over circumstances.

While a case for the lesbian relation to camp has been made, it is the gay male "possession" of that culture which has been stressed most often, and it is the history of redefining masculinity in response to feminist initiatives that I shall be considering in the pages that follow. Camp, whether in its humorous everyday form, in its traditionally institutionalized form of female impersonation, or in its most politicized form as radical drag, has played a crucial, if checkered, role in that history.

In Myron, his 1974 sequel to Myra Breckinridge, Gore Vidal wrings dry the logic of gay camp's fascination with the golden age of Hollywood cinema, especially the years 1935–1945, when no irrelevant film was made in Hollywood, and our boys—properly nurtured on Andy Hardy and the values of Carville as interpreted by Mickey Rooney, Lewis Stone, Fay Holden and given the world by Dream Merchant Louis B. Mayer—were able to defeat the forces of Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo." Myron, a reconstructed sex-change version of the buccaneering cinephile Myra, whose spirit still schizophrenically returns to reclaim his body and faculties, is transported back in time to the 1949 MGM set of Sirens of Babylon, starring Bruce Cabot and Maria Montez, the incomparable "Cobra Queen" turned "Priestess of the Sun." Myron discovers that he is an unwitting vehicle of Myra's desire to change the history of Hollywood by reversing its upcoming fate. By ensuring that Sirens of Babylon is a blockbuster hit, MGM and the star system will be saved, Hollywood will stave off the threat of television, and Myra will be able to reaffirm her feminist mission of changing "man's sexual image," of which the most successful achievement in the novel is to perform the first vasectomy on an unsuspecting male extra in the film.

Vidal's mock-heroic account of Myra's mission is a highly stylized reminder that there is much more at stake in camp cinephilia than a merely indulgent expression of nostalgia for glamour and spectacle. Gay male identification with the power and prestige of the female star was, first and foremost, an identification with women as emotional subjects in a world in which men "acted" and women "felt." In this respect, camp reasserted, for gay males, the "right to ornamentation and emotion, that Western and particularly Anglo-Saxon society has defined as feminine preoccupations. Since these are qualities rarely emphasized by the legitimate representations of masculine sexuality, there are few male culture heroes in the camp pantheon; gay-identified actors like Montgomery Clift and Tab Hunter are an exception, while the emotional sensitivity of Marlon Brando and James Dean was more of a focus of interest for straight women in a pre- or proto-feminist conjuncture.

Identification with the female film star's "power" is not, of course, without its contradictions, for representations of that power are not unconditionally granted within Hollywood film itself, where the exercise of such power in the service of some transgression of male-defined behavior would generally be met, within the narrative, by punishment and chastisement. As Michael Bronski argues, however, the mere idea that sexuality brings with it a degree of power, "albeit limited and precarious, can be exhilarating" for the gay male who "knows that his sexuality will get him in trouble." But what can the relation of this everyday triumph of the will to the commodified spectacle of a major star's "sexuality" tell us about the awesome power exercised through the institution of sexuality itself, a power that is more usually directed against women and sexual minorities? This is the question which gay politics came to ask of the pre-political culture organized around camp.

In answering that question, it is important always to bear in mind that the traditional gay camp sensibility was an imaginary expression of a relation to real conditions, both past and present—an ideology, if you like—while it functions today, in the "liberated" gay and straight world, as a kind of imaginative challenge to the new symbolic conditions of gay identity. Whether as a pre-Stonewall, survivalist fantasy, or as a post-Stonewall return of the repressed, camp works to destabilize, reshape, and transform the existing balance of accepted sexual roles and sexual identities. It seldom proposes a direct relation between the conditions it speaks to—everyday life in the present—and the discourse it speaks with—usually a bricolage of features pilfered from fantasies of the bygone.

This perception may help to answer, in part, the charge of misogyny that is often brought to bear, quite justifiably, upon camp representations of "feminine" characteristics. It could be argued, for example, that the camp idolization of female film stars contributes to a desexualization of the female body. In the context of classic Hollywood film, a social spectacle where women often have little visible existence outside of their being posed as the embodiment of the sexual, any reading which defetishizes the erotic scenario of woman-as-spectacle is a reading that is worth having. Indeed, in the classic camp pantheon, most film stars are celebrated for reasons other than their successful dramatization of erotic otherness. It is in this respect that gay camp looks forward to later feminist appraisals of the "independent" women of Hollywood, who fought for their own roles, either against the studios themselves, or in the highly mannered ways in which they acted out, acted around, or acted against the grain of the sexually circumscribed stereotypes which they were contracted to dramatize.

Bette Davis, whose looks excluded her from the stock image-repertoire of screen sexiness (one of her earlier directors complained "Who'd want
to go to bed with her?"), was the most enduring example of the star whose screen identity could not be fixed by the studio machine, a woman who openly contested the terms of her contract with Warner Brothers, and whose wide variety of roles ensured that she escaped a life sentence of character typing. Aside from her superb acting skills, it was Davis's willed evasion of this fate that her fans saw reflected in the nervous and impetuous intensity with which she invests the celebrated "bitchiness" of her roles in such films as Of Human Bondage (1934), Jezebel (1938), The Little Foxes (1941), All About Eve, and Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? 40 While the wide range of her mannered repertoire is often reduced in camp caricature to the famously over-used cigarette, or her wildly rolling eyes, it is clear that the sense of irony she conveyed through such gestures was more of a performance about the performance of her roles, rather than one which comfortably interpreted these roles. In contrast to Joan Crawford's earnest control over her roles, Davis could separate voice and body, image and discourse, and play off one against the other. But Mae West is the star who most professionally exploits the ironies of artifice when, like a female drag queen, she represents a woman who parodies a burlesque woman, and then seems to take on the role for real, as a way of successfully holding every kind of masculine response known to woman. West pioneered a new bold, no-nonsense, no-romance relation with sex, while the sexual ambiguities of Garbo, and all variations on the theme of woman-as-bird of and the go-getter. Judy Garland, on the other hand, was a cult figure whose associated star persona had little to do with the ironic artifice of camp, since her roles insisted on her naturalness, innocence, and ordinariness, and, above all else, vulnerability. Richard Dyer has argued that she "is not a star turned into camp, but a star who expresses camp attitudes," as if she had been well versed in gay camp culture from the very beginning, and not just towards the end of her career when she ritually acknowledged the gay constituency of her most loyal audience. 41 Her lack of glamour, and pronounced refusal of "feminine" grace meant that, like Davis, she fell outside of the conventional requirements of the Hollywood starlet, and this enabled her to enter into more unorthodox roles (the tramp-as-androgynous, tragi-comically beyond gender, is one which Dyer emphasizes). It was not until her personal hardships became public, and she embarked on a phase of repeated comebacks, that the conceit of survival in the face of all odds became an intrinsic part of her performing persona. It was in this period, right through the sixties, that her struggle between the role of self-destructive loser and resilient, irrepressible fighter took on a parable-like significance for a gay culture increasingly in search of overt rather than heavily coded forms of identification. The more recent commercial success of performers like Streisand, and Midler, while it reflects the genuine talents of these gutsy artiestes, has been indissociable from the publicly visible support of a gay audience.

In a 1975 interview, Sontag suggested that the diffusion of camp taste in the earlier part of the decade ought to be credited "with a considerable if inadvertent role in the upsurge of feminist consciousness in the late 1960s." In particular, she claims that the fascination with the "corny flamboyance of feminateness" in certain actresses helped to "undermine the credibility of certain stereotyped femininities—by exaggerating them, by putting them between quotation marks." 42 In acknowledging this, Sontag was withdrawing from one of her most controversial arguments in "Notes on Camp"—that camp was essentially "apolitical." While gay intellectuals have long challenged this view, its flaws became increasingly visible as an emergent sexual politics in the late sixties began to openly criticize and explore existing definitions of femininity and masculinity. Many of the ensuing debates about sexual politics focused on questions which camp had, in its own way, already been addressing, in particular, the relation between "artifice" and "nature" in the construction of sexuality and gender identity. In fact, camp could be seen as a much earlier, highly coded way of addressing those questions about sexual difference which have engaged non-essentialist feminists in recent years.

To non-essentialist feminism and to the gay camp tradition alike, the significance of particular film stars lies in their various challenges to the assumed naturalness of gender roles. Each of these stars presents a different way, at different historical times, of living with the "masquerade" of femininity. 43 Each demonstrates how to perform a particular representation of womanliness, and the effect of these performances is to demonstrate, in turn, why there is no "authentic" femininity, why there are only representations of femininity, socially redefined from moment to moment. So too, the "masculine" woman, as opposed to the androgynous, represents to men what is unreal about masculinity, in a way similar to the effect of actors whose masculinity is overdone and quickly dated (Victor Mature is the best example, not least, I think, because of the symmetry of his names).

If camp has a politics, then it is one that proposes working with and through existing definitions and representations, and in this respect, it is opposed to the search for alternative, utopian, or essentialist identities which lay behind many of the countercultural and sexual liberation movements. In fact, it was precisely because of this commitment to the mimicry of existing cultural forms, and its refusal to advocate wholesale breaks with these same forms, that camp was seen as pre-political and out of step with the dominant ethos of the liberation movements. Nonetheless, its disreputable survival in gay culture, and its crossover presence in
straight culture, has had a significant effect on the constantly shifting, 
hegemonic definition of masculinity in the last two decades.

Garland, Davis, and the other queens of Hollywood are one thing, 
Maria Montez, Tallulah Bankhead, Carmen Miranda, and Eartha Kitt 
are another. If the latter are also figures celebrated by gay camp, then it 
is not for their thespian talents or for their stylized parodies of femininity. 
On the contrary, the widespread cultivation of these exploited actresses 
(Myron's cult of Montez is representative) is unarguably tinged with 
ridicule, derision, even misogyny. Their moments in the camp limelight 
cannot fail to conceal a "failed seriousness" that is more often pathetic 
and risible than it is witty or parodic. But to see how and where 
the contradictions of this cult homage are fully played out, we must look at 
the performance culture of female impersonation, the professional stage 
version of everyday gay camp.

Drag, in its professional form, is strictly an art of performance for an 
audience, and must be distinguished from the more private, sexualized 
practices of transvestism and transsexualism. Drag artists do not want 
to "pass" as woman, and, consequently, dress over the top in order to 
foreground their role-playing. Like all solo performances, the drag 
routine is an highly individualistic interpretation of role-playing within what 
is often a very restricted repertoire of stock characters. There is little 
room to maneuver, but the art lies in the virtuoso skill of maneuvering. 
Beyond the clearly utopian suggestiveness of any individual performance, 
drag is also a ritual affirmation of the communitarian solidarity 
of an audience which is familiar with the references, and which will 
respond to the "in" humor. But if drag is a form of professional clowning, 
it is also shot through with a maudlin amateurism, balanced by the stoical 
show business imperative—in spite of everything, the show must go on. 
In this respect, there is an element of ritual self-deprecation, even fatalism, 
in the otherwise celebratory drag performance. That the vehicle for 
this self-denigration happens to be a parodic representation of a woman 
is neither logical nor circumstantial, but is quite clearly bound up with 
the complex social expression of the parent culture's misogynistic forms, 
however much these forms may be intentionally rearticulated by the 
camp routine as a stylized tribute to the strength of long-suffering women.

Like "Jewish self-hatred," or "Tomming" in black culture, gay camp 
was arguably a form of defense constructed by an oppressed group out 
of conditions not of its own making. However, as Esther Newton argues 
of the camp queen (the offstage wit of gay culture), "The camp says, 'I 
am not like the oppressors.' But in doing so he agrees with the oppressors' 
definition of who he is. The new radicals deny the stigma in a different 
way by saying that the oppressors are illegitimate. This step is only 
foreshadowed in camp." From the point of view of gay liberation, camp 
could only be a survivalist ethic, and never an oppositional critique.

And yet Radical Drag, as it was known, came to be an important, if short-lived, 
strategy of the feminist-inspired GLF critique of traditional male 
values. Worn by some as a way of directly and publicly experiencing the 
oppression of women, and by others as a way of ridiculing traditional 
gay male roles, "hairy" drag tried to transform survivalism into oppositionality, 
but was itself unable to survive lesbian criticism that it exploited 
female oppression to make its point. However, just as drag was crossing 
over into mainstream male dressing, it may have entered offstage gay 
male culture in the figure of the macho, leather clone. As much a fantasy 
object as the drag queen, the butch clone has been seen as a new form 
of drag, a send-up of social expectations of male homosexuality, and a 
subversive commentary on the encoded, misogynistic power of macho 
masculinity: "If the man dressed as a woman was, in effect, mocking 
the assumptions society makes about men and women, then the man dressed 
as a stereotypical man is also mocking the assumptions that to be gay is 
to want to be a woman."

As make-up and dressing-up became an everyday part of the flamboyant 
strange counterculture, "drag" took on the generalized meaning of 
everyday role-playing. Here, for example, is Myra Breckinridge's analysis 
of the male swinger:

It is true that the swingers, as they are called, make up only a small 
minority of our society; yet they hold a great attraction for the young 
and bored who are the majority and who keep their sanity (those that 
do) by having a double sense of themselves. On the one hand, they must 
appear to accept without question our culture's myth that the male must 
be dominant, aggressive, woman-oriented. On the other hand, they are 
perfectly aware that few men are anything but slaves to an economic 
and social system that does not allow them to knock people down as 
proof of virility or in any way act out the traditional male role. As a 
result the young men compensate by playing at being men, attempting 
cowboy clothes, boots, black leather, in any way act out the traditional 
role. As a result the young men compensate by playing at being men, wearing 
cowboy clothes, boots, black leather, attempting through clothes 
what an age for the fetishist!) to impersonate the kind of man our society 
claims to admire but swiftly puts down should he attempt to be anything 
more than an illusionist, playing a part."

Myra concludes that it would be a healthy contribution to her mission of 
destroying "the last vestigial traces of traditional manhood" if this role-
playing were to be encouraged. Her sentiments, at least, are defined by 
a clear political aim, and in this respect were hardly typical of the general 
tone set by the male swingers of the counterculture who pursued the 
golden fleece of sexual liberation in the late sixties. Countercultural 
liberation for straight men was one moment in the two decades of "per-
missiveness” (whose definition?) which began with the swinging Playboy ethic of mid-fifties and ended with the stirrings of the neo-conservative backlash in the mid-seventies. Barbara Ehrenreich has argued that the fifties “male revolt” against the suburban bondage of breadwinning, symbolized by the consumerist Playboy lifestyle, also delivered men from suspicions of homosexuality that had hitherto been attached to men who avoided marriage. So, too, the “ethnicization” of homosexuality which gay liberation had fostered by advocating the policy of “coming out” meant that straight men could pursue their exploration of androgyny without the fear of their heterosexuality being questioned. The new macho man was gay. The radical “moment” of bisexuality was lost.

The privileges of androgyny, of course, were generally not available for women until well into the seventies, and after male had run its spectacular, public course through a succession of musical youth heroes: David Bowie (the first and the best, although Jagger and Lou Reed had been pioneers), Alice Cooper, the New York Dolls, Elton John, Iggy Pop, Marc Bolan, and other dandies of glam rock. It was not until punk ushered in a newer and more offensive kind of oppositional drag that women fully participated within rock culture in the confrontational strategies of posing and transgressing: Poly Styrene, Jordan, Wendy O. Williams, Patti Smith, and, above all, Sousies Sue. When Annie Lennox appeared at the 1984 Grammy Awards ceremony in full Elvis drag, at least one sexual history of rock ‘n’ roll had come full circle. And as for Grace Jones, she is “acting the part of a man, not a boy,” when she drags a male from her audience and simulates anal sex with him.29

To look, today, for representations of the anti-social or threatening expressions of camp and drag, we must go to the outrageously spectacular heroes of the youth metal heavy scene. In popular rock culture today, the most “masculine” images are signified by miles of coiffured hair, layers of gaudy make-up, and a complete range of fetishistic body accessories, while it is the clean-cut, close-cropped, fifties-style Europop crooners who are seen as lacking masculine legitimacy.

Rock ‘n’ roll has long played the game of good boy/bad boy. If Bruce Springsteen embodies the stable, nostalgic image of traditional working-class masculinity, then it is the punks and the B-boys who represent the unruly, marginalized underside. In mainstream rock, however, it is the feminized cock rockers who are supposedly identified with the most retarded—aggressive, disrespectful, and homophobic—characteristics of working-class masculinity. It is ironic, then, to consider that when, in 1984, the affable Boy George received a Grammy Award on network television, he told his audience: “Thank you, America, you’ve got style and taste, and you know a good drag queen when you see one.” Behind this ambiguous compliment, there was a long Wildean history of smug European attitudes towards American puritanism. But what did Boy George’s comment mean in the age of Motley Crue, Aerosmith, Kiss, and Rapp, whose shared use of drag is directly tied to a certain construction of American masculinity? There is more than just class at stake here, although it is clear that heavy metal today is as much an assault on middle-class masculinity as it is an affirmation of sexist working-class bravado. What is also at stake, I think, is the international balance of patriarchal power. The brashness associated with heavy metal drag speaks, like Rambo’s caricature of the he-man, to the legitimate power of American masculinity in the world today. By contrast, the jolly decorum of Boy George bespeaks the softer European contours of a masculinity in the twilight of its power. One is emboldened and threatening, the other is sentimental and peace loving.

Warhol and the Bottom Line

As a result of the sexual revolution, then, camp has come to bear upon cultural politics almost in spite of itself. But to recover its intrinsic significance as a cultural economy we need to go back to look at the work of Andy Warhol, the figure who singlehandedly generated so many of the shifts of sixties taste.

Recalling the moment of high camp, Warhol celebrated the drag queen for pseudo-scholarly reasons:

Among other things, drag queens are living testimony to the way women used to want to be, and the way some people still want them to be, and the way some women still actually want to be. Drags are ambulatory archives of ideal moviestar womanhood. They perform a documentary service, usually consecrating their lives to keeping the glittering alternative alive and available for (not-too-close) inspection. . . . I’m not saying it’s the right thing to do, I’m not saying it’s a good idea. I’m not saying it’s not self-defeating and self-destructive, and I’m not saying it’s not possibly the single most absurd thing a man can do with his life. What I’m saying is, it is very hard work. You can’t take that away from them. It’s hard work to look like the complete opposite of what nature made you and then to be an imitation woman of what was only a fantasy woman in the first place. When they took the movie stars and stuck them in the kitchen, they weren’t stars anymore—they were just like you and me. Drag queens are reminders that some stars still aren’t just like you and me.30

Within the counterculture, the street queen had suddenly become an accepted and even fashionable embodiment of the new “problems” faced
by men in the burgeoning sexual revolution ("I may not know exactly what I am, but at least I know I am not a drag queen"), and drags like Holly Woodlawn, Candy Darling, and Jackie Curtis all became minor celebrities through their roles in the later Warhol/Morrissey films, from _Chelsea Girls_ (1966) onwards. It is important to note, however, that the work ethic of the drag queens—they work "double time" at playing women—is more intriguing to Warhol than what they symbolize sexually; "after being alive," he once said, "the next hardest work is having sex."

For without Warhol's own lifelong homage to the idea of a work ethic, we would not have his exemplary, and often brilliant, commentary on a subcultural world, largely of his own creation, that went out of its way to publicize the seamless links between commerce and art, labor and taste.

Raised in a Pennsylvania factory town, and educated at the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now the Carnegie-Mellon University), Warhol's "industrial" loyalty to the principles of efficiency and productivity were the rationale for the ceaseless output of art, films, and style at his own Factory. For someone who was famous for statements like "Business Art is the step that comes after Art," the exemplary model of commercial art production was the Hollywood studio system (his practice of "signing" all Factory products has been compared profitably to the infamous Disney industry signature). Warhol's early, and most famous artworks were garishly colored, serial, silkscreen images of "dead" Hollywood glamour—Marilyn Monroe (recently deceased) and Liz Taylor (starring in the "death" of the epic film, _Cleopatra_, 1963), and other sixties icons associated with death, like Jackie Kennedy. They were trashy tributes to the demise of the star system, while the images themselves were created by means of the mass production techniques endemic to the making of that same star system.

In "changing the means of production of painting," by employing these mass-production techniques, Emile De Antonio, the documentary filmmaker, claims that Warhol was demonstrating "what was unique in mass production, which Ford and General Motors can't do." What De Antonio means is that what Warhol did can never be copied—and still be art. And yet, these images also speak to what Ford and General Motors actually do when they discontinue production of a model, which is to create the conditions for the commodity glamour and cult appeal of the nostalgia market for the "uniqueness" of old cars. If, for the moment, quantity is always better than quality—"Thirty is Better than One" said Warhol—the planned obsolescence of the mass product ensures that thirty will very soon be one, and that history, even the most recent past, will always involve no less of an antique pursuit of forms and objects in "mint condition." It is only in theory that mass-produced culture is infinitely reproducible.

But Warhol was always more interested. I think, in the production and consumption of _individuation_—the ideological commodity of personalities, stars, celebrities, and fans—than he was in the "problem" that has so engaged art criticism in the last two decades: the tarnished,auratic "uniqueness" of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. That is why film and not art is his most important medium.

From the moment that a "crowd" began to gather around him at the Factory, Warhol was committed to setting up an alternative studio system geared to regular and rapid production, with its own stable of home-grown Superstars (with their own seedy stage names), its own casting system, screen tests, and publicity stunts to stimulate media attention. Warhol copied all of the institutions of the legitimate studio system in a way which traded directly on the camp appeal of faded star quality but which also made no attempt to conceal the celebrity-making processes which manufactured "star quality." In re-producing, on the cheap, this instant celebrity-value, which at the height of Hollywood production was the stylized product of immense capital investment—the ultimate commodity fetish of mass-produced culture—Warhol was interpreting the democratic principle of Pop in the undemocratic, entrepreneurial spirit of the culture industry; anyone can be a star/president/celebrity, but also, anyone can make a star out of others. This was a critique of the elitist tastemaker, but only by being a paean to the entrepreneur.

Some of the Superstars were quite simply "found" personalities, like the eponymous Ingrid Superstar, the refrigerator saleswoman from New Jersey. However, the most famous were deliberately cultivated by Warhol, and, in fact, carefully defined the changing ideological moments of the sixties: first, Baby Jane Holzer, the socialite, whose involvement in the underground culture was designed to be a temporary, if very public flirtation; her successor, Edie Sedgwick, whose frenzied immersal, by contrast, was all-consuming and given over, finally, to the death drives which it courted; then Nico, whose alienated foreign chic was a forerunner of the de-Americanized flavor of the counterculture; and finally Viva, whose upfront feminism looked forward to a new kind of woman altogether. Real stars and Superstars would often be juxtaposed, either by design, when Edie and Judy (Garland) would be at the same party, with Edie claiming all the attention, or by accident, when Gloria Swanson passed by in a limousine at Candy Darling's funeral. Even more skewed was the story that, during the time when Hollywood was courting Warhol at the end of the sixties, Rita Hayworth insisted to him, over the phone, that he could make her "the most super star of all."

If Warhol's scene was governed, in its own way, by the logic of the entrepreneur, then it was a ghoulish culture that he produced, because it fed off the living's fatal attraction to older, and thus more valuable,
forms of glamor. The victims of that logic litter the pages of the history of Warholism just as in “Hollywood Babylon,” and its critics recount the same narrative of loveless exploitation. Arguably, the most fascinating story of the period is Edie: An American Biography, a book about the ill-fated scion of an old Social Register family, which documents the starred role in the same way as he was displaced from the centers of attention, argue that his position as master of the passivity gave him the power to activate an authentic desire in his of being the biggest Superstar of all. Critics of contradictions involved in being a tastemaker for the East Coast trash aesthetic. Being at the for money out of every-thing he did, no matter what role he was playing, was the theater of inauthenticity. Warhol himself, as Stephen Koch argues, was his own creator. He declared immune to any responsibility for the often tragic consequences of this frustrated desire. Others, more sympathetic, claim that Warhol’s strategy was to therapeutically empty out the meaning of the cult of individualism that lay behind the “imposture” of stardom’s “creation of “plastic idols.”

On the other hand, there was nothing particularly ethical (or unethical) about the way in which Warhol worked. In fact, the tragedy of Edie and others arose out of the contradictions of being a celebrity but not a star in an avant-garde and not a popular cultural milieu. If there was a Warhol revolution in “arts and entertainment” in the sixties, then it was because his definition of the conditions of celebrityhood was aimed at showing that nothing intervened between the realms of arts and entertainment. What lay behind the famous proclamation “Everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes” was not so much a democratic invitation to fame and fortune as the re-invention of “ordinariness” for people to whom the popular media had long been remote or paternalizing as a source of ethics and information, and more intimate and relevant as a source of fantasy and inspiration. In this respect, Warhol rose below the tabloid sensitivity to trivia, “re-exposing” the everyday, to use Peter Gidal’s term, until it only made sense as the stuff of the fantasies to which everyone was entitled.

Besides, Warhol himself was the bane of the intentionalist critic’s existence. Everything he said to the media was supposed to mean exactly what he said, and nothing more: there’s nothing behind it/me. And everything in his work that spoke to the exploitative conditions of capital-ist production was simply part of the show he was “promoting.” Of course, this did not prevent his “victims” hitting back. But when Valerie Solanas, a leader of SCUM (The Society For Cutting Up Men) almost fatally injured him in a 1968 shooting as a response to his control over her, it was like an earlier Factory shootout, when an unknown fired bullets through some Marilyn paintings, later sold, of course. Rather than properly analyze his own involvement in this traumatic incident, Warhol simply acknowledged that he had been one of the first “feminist casualties”—in other words, a victim of the times, of which he was a passive, or, in this case, quite literally a receptive recorder.

Upwardly mobile, Warhol moved, after the shooting, from the Factory milieu of his “kids”—hustlers, junkies, drag queens—to the world of Andy Warhol Enterprises, where, in the seventies, he reluctantly cultivated the already famous and the moneyed Reaganites. In this latter phase, he played at being a hired flunky in the same way as he had earlier played at being a tastemaker for the East Coast trash aesthetic. His diabolical reputation, in the media, for making money out of every-thing he did, no matter what role he was playing, was the punishment for the way in which he called attention to the contradictory logic of publicity culture, provoking not only the envious magnates of the mass media, but also the anti-commercial conscience of the counterculture. But whether or not Warhol acted out his role in order to expose the process of exploitation, was finally irrelevant. He was no more an opponent of the process than he was a traditional legitimist for the power and prestige of the glitterati. The point was always to ask: What’s art got to do with it?

Warhol’s sayings like “Buying is much more American than thinking” mortified those who would rather not see the comparison being made at all, and ridiculed those, to whom I am sympathetic, who were willing to think seriously about the original Pop promise of an active and informed audience for popular culture. But we must always be wary of reading such Pop truisms out of their camp context. I have suggested that there was an economy of camp at work in the sixties which “employed” or contracted the Pop intellectual in a number of ways. If camp can be seen as a cultural economy which challenged, and, in some cases, helped to overturn legitimate definitions of taste and sexuality, it must also be remembered that to what extent this cultural economy was tied to the capitalist logic of development which governed the culture industries. Nowhere is this more faithfully demonstrated than in the following remarks of War hol, tongue-in-cheek certainly, but religiously devoted nonetheless to the “idea” of his philosophy of work:

I always like to work on leftovers, doing the leftover things. Things that were discarded and that everybody knew were no good, I always thought had a great potential to be funny. It was like recycling work. I always thought there was a lot of humor in leftovers. . . . I’m not saying that popular taste is bad so that what’s left over is probably bad, but if you
can take it and make it good or at least interesting, then you're not wasting as much as you would otherwise. You're recycling work and you're recycling people, and you're running your business as a byproduct of other businesses. Of other directly competitive businesses, as a matter of fact. So that's a very economical operating procedure. It's also the funniest operating procedure because, as I said, leftovers are inherently funny.

Warhol here reveals what he knows about camp's re-creation of surplus value from leftovers; the low risks involved, the overheads accounted for, and the profit margins expected. The suggestion that Art is constructed out of the leftovers from popular taste was one way of describing the reorganization of the economy of cultural taste that took place in the course of the sixties. As I have pointed out, it was a way of talking about art that offended some intellectuals because it suggested, even if Warhol never seemed to mean what he said, that its attention to economy was more than just a metaphor for the critique of capitalism that all art must surely deliver straight from its autonomous heart. It suggested that art had something more directly to do with products, consumers, and markets than it had to do with fighting the "good fight" or with the aesthete's windless realm of great art.

As for what Warhol refers to as the inherent "funniness" of leftovers, that is the other side of camp—the creamy wit, the wicked fantasies, and the gaieté de coeur. All that was, and still is, priceless.

The Popularity of Pornography

But why porno? Simple—I'm an exhibitionist with a cause: to make sexually explicit (hard core) erotica, and today's porno is the only game in town. But it's a game where there is a possibility of the players, over time, getting some of the rules changed. (Nina Hartley, porn film star, 1987)

The First Amendment ... belongs to those who can buy it. (Andrea Dworkin, 1978)

Pornography from a woman's point of view? Yes, said the owner of my local video store, of course he could recommend some, and rattled off the titles of a few of the more popular "couples" films currently being rented. Could he describe them? Longer, romantic sequences, with appropriate mood music, and lots of emphasis on feelings. Does this mean that there's no hard core? No, not at all, he said, and this time, his business instincts aroused, he leaned toward me, after a ritual glance over his shoulder, and proceeded to assure me, man to man, that the actors eventually did get down to the real stuff; it just took a little longer, and it was, sort of, different.

This "sort of" difference has been exerting its pressure on the porn industry for over ten years now, ever since female consumers were acknowledged as the largest potential growth market for pornographic entertainment and sex accessories. While recent video titles like Every Woman Has A Fantasy and In All the Right Places reflect this shift in the heterosexual market, women themselves are beginning to stake out positions of power within the industry, not just as stars, commanding larger fees and various kinds of "artistic control" over their work, but also as producers and directors.

Christine's Secret (directed by Candida Royalle and R. Lauren Neimi, 1984), made and distributed by Candida Royalle's Femme Productions, is one of the first and best examples of the new kind of porn film, made by women, that is organized in a non-phallocentric way. Shot on an idyllic country farm, and set to New Age music, the film's unswerving loyalty to a code of "natural," mutual, and wholesome pleasures seems like a complete inversion of the dark regime of confinement and mutilation that is to be found in the Sadeian chateau. The editing is skillful and inventive:


50. Uses of Camp


3. No one has pursued more assiduously the task of exposing the seedy and tragic side of Hollywood's own celebration of this cult than Kenneth Anger, in his *Hollywood Babylon* (New York: Bell, 1975); and *Hollywood Babylon II* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984).


14. And yet, all of the consequences of Altamont's "diabolism," which are customarily linked, in myth and history, with the Manson murders and the Weathermen's Days of Rage, were mere drops of blood compared to the carnage of Vietnam. As Marshall Berman puts it, in his memoir of the sixties:

If we are looking for genuine diabolism, rampant nihilism, we should forget about characters in weird clothes singing "Sympathy for the Devil"—people...
like that are bound to be dilettantes, amateurs at best. We should focus instead on the sober organization men in crew cuts and business suits—Mephisto appears as one of these men in the last act of Faust—doing their jobs in a calm and orderly way. This perspective may strip the powers of darkness of their romantic dash, but it will give us a clearer vision of their real power and dread.


28. Roy Lichtenstein, "Interview with G.R. Swenson," in Russell and Gablik, Pop Art Redefined, p. 92. Lichtenstein adds, however: "apparently they didn't hate that enough either"—a jaded reference to the fact that Pop Art, despite its best intentions, proved to be as "hangable" as any other kind of art.


36. An extraordinarily well-researched survey of bad taste films is Incredibly Strange Films, issue #10 of RESEARCH (1986), guest edited by Jim Morton, the editor of Trashola Newsletter.

37. Medved and Medved, Golden Turkey Awards, p. 12.

38. Feminist film theory has been addressing this problem for the last fifteen years. See Constance Penley, ed., Feminism and Film Theory (New York: Routledge, 1988); Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987); and Mary Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, eds., Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism (Frederick, MC: University Publications of America, 1984).


43. Bronski, Culture Clash, p. 95.

44. Altman, The Homosexualization Of America, p. 154.

45. Bronski, Culture Clash, p. 96.


49. In the psychoanalytic tradition, the classic essay on the "masquerade of femininity" is Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as Masquerade," reprinted in Formations of Fantasy, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), and accompanied by an incisive commentary by Stephen Heath, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade," which sets out the choices for feminist film theory in the light of Riviere's arguments. See also Mary Ann Doone, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," Screen, 23, 3-4 (1982).

50. Michael Bronski asks the relevant question about the choices of these female performers: "It would be absurd to want to pretend that any of these women had a great talent, but what does it mean for a large group of gay men to like a female performer expressly because of the fact that she is terrible?" (Judy Garland and Others: Notes on Idolization and Derision. Lavender Culture, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 210. You refer to Bronski, but it is actually Karla Jay and Allen Young who are the editors."


53. In this respect, Kris Kirk and Ed Heath's fascinating oral history of drag is especially perceptive in documenting the feelings and attitudes of the earlier professional chorus queens when, in the sixties, drag became a crossover culture. Men in Frocks (London: Gay Men's Press, 1984).

54. Altman, The Homosexualization of America, p. 13. Leo Bersani, by contrast, sees in gay machismo only a profound identification with and yearning for the oppressive power of motorbike masculinity—"a perversion rather than a subversion of real maleness."


61. There is a debate about whether stars, as products, belong more to conditions of production or to conditions of consumption. If they are primarily the result of the power of producers, the consumers are simply manipulated dupes—the Frankfurt School position. More useful is Francesco Alberoni's "election" thesis, whereby stars are nominated by producers, but elected by the consumers according to the conditions of the specific ideological moment. See Richard Dyer's discussion of this thesis and others in Stars (London: British Film Institute, 1979). The classic work is Edgar Morin's Les Stars (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

62. Warhol, Popism, p. 296. At the height of "the Warhol film" output, Holly Woodlawn claims to have seen a clearly defined system of alternative typing: "I was the Hedy Lamarr—sultry. Candy was the Kim Novak or another blonde type. Jackie was the Crawford type—vicious and strong type, and Joe [Dallesandro] was the Clark Gable.


6. The Popularity of Pornography

1. Barbara Ehrenreich notes that the Heftner philosophy of the "playboy" was specifically anti-wife: "Playboy charged into the battle of the sexes with a dollar sign on its banner. The issue was money; men made it; women wanted it." (The Politics of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1983), p. 46. The first issue of the magazine promised that the Playboy lifestyle would include inviting a female acquaintance to the apartment "for a quiet discussion on Nietzsche, Picasso, jazz, sex."


