

Follow the Glitter Way

Lady Gaga and Camp

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Gaga in Garland-land

When Dorothy was not in black and white Kansas anymore and instead hopped, danced, and sang her way along the yellow brick road in bright Technicolor and ruby slippers, a camp classic was born. Closeted “Friends of Dorothy” started using the film as a secret reference to their own homosexuality, while “Over the Rainbow” and its singer Judy Garland became gay icons to such an extent that her funeral indirectly sparked the gay rights movement and that “it is a truth almost universally acknowledged that a single man in the possession of a Judy Garland CD must not be in want of a wife” (Cohan 287).¹ *The Wizard of Oz* thus serves as a prime example of camp’s function as queer community building and code-producing artifact from popular culture as well as a defining inspiration for the excessive aesthetics of camp. Queer fans as well as a diverse range of scholars, including Richard Dyer, reveled in the queer meaning and countercultural value of the 1939 musical, claiming the film as either a powerful metaphor of coming out, of the decision between a butch or femme identity or other queer-specific experiences, and thus cemented the iconic film’s status as surpassing even that of Judy Garland’s legendary Carnegie Hall Concert.² Though Lady Gaga has yet to play her first solo-show at Carnegie Hall and her professional career spans merely three years, pop’s latest sensation is already notorious enough to raise similar suspicions as Garland about the “wants” of those who own a copy of *The Fame (Monster)* or a ticket to *The Monster Ball Tour*.³ As a mixture of the outrageous *The Wizard of Oz* and the emotional Carnegie Hall concert (among others), Lady Gaga’s “The Monster Ball,” in particular, out-camps even Garland’s triumphant legacy — a legacy Lady Gaga both playfully and

purposefully engages, when she promises her Little Monsters that “The Monster Ball will be a place where they will finally be set free and tells them “...to get to The Monster Ball all you got to do is follow the Glitter Way” (*The Monster Ball Tour*). Though this verbal reference to *The Wizard of Oz*’s “Follow the Yellow Brick Road” might be understood as merely a superficial inside joke for those of her fans old enough to recognize the reference, I want to argue instead that Gaga employs both the intertextual references in her show and her work in general, of which there are plenty, as well as camp and camp aesthetics in meaningful ways. Lady Gaga’s fondness for paying homage to earlier stars and icons is widely recognized and is as apparent in her name (taken from a Queen song) as in her commercial collaboration with Polaroid (whose instant-camera was extensively used by Andy Warhol) or her artistic output (such as the Madonna-inspired “Alejandro” video set to a beat reminiscent of Europop-band Ace of Base). Yet by turning her pop concerts thematically into an inspirational journey and visually into the bastard-child of postmodern video installation, a Britney-Spears clip, and a Broadway show, Gaga is doing more than simply referencing these camp predecessors in a meaningless pastiche of another era’s styles and stars. Instead, Gaga is building her unique performances on quotations and pop ready-mades in order to establish a pop ancestry, which she at the same time outpaces, and a gendered identity, which she deconstructs at the very moment of its construction. In short, Gaga is employing camp as a strategy critically and politically to queer her persona and performance.

Camp’s Queer Revival

Since pop divas like Lady Gaga today, as well as Cher, Annie Lennox or Madonna before, and camp often share the stage, it should not come as a surprise that they also share a common fate, namely that dismissal using tropes and stereotypes, their emphasis on style and their dangerous liaison with mainstream culture. Just as camp, the ironic-parodistic style that originated as a secret code in the Anglophone, gay subculture of the early 20th century, had been discarded by many queers as retrogressive after the Stonewall riots and subsequent emergence of the gay rights movement, Lady Gaga has been accused of having lost her subversive edge when trading the burlesque stages of downtown Manhattan for those of the MTV Video Music Awards.

The (re-)establishment of camp as a valid queer strategy in a Post-Stonewall culture depended upon and was informed by a new approach to the subject matter from queer and feminist perspectives. This revival of interest in camp originated in the 1980s, when, as David Bergmann states, “AIDS and

poststructuralist theory [made] camp intellectually and politically respectable again" (9). Among the most important theories for this poststructuralist, queer notion of camp are those by Judith Butler, Pamela Robertson, Linda Hutcheon and Jack Babuscio, whose works helped to shape its conceptualization as a political, critical and potentially transgressive practice.⁴ Essentially defined as a parodic device characterized by the four basic features of "irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor" (Babuscio 20), camp came to be understood as capable of questioning a given pretext's status as "original" or "natural," and able to open mainstream cultural production to queer readings, hence constituting a queer way of communicating in largely heteronormative commercial surroundings. This strong connection of camp to hegemonic discourses divides it from decisively countercultural queer and feminist techniques and strategies, and also leads to controversy about camp's progressive potential. Although Linda Hutcheon who insists that irony and parody, two important components of camp communication, gain their strength from their "intimacy with the dominant discourse" (*Irony* 89), I posit, however, that camp has the potential to become even more effective when placed in pop-cultural contexts. Despite opposing claims about the dominance of meaningless pastiche in contemporary culture, Hutcheon further argues for the transformative power of parody insofar as parody functions as "repetition with a critical difference" (*Parody* 7). "Critical difference" is produced through irony,⁵ which as Hutcheon convincingly argues is not to be confused with ambiguity, as irony adds an evaluative edge. This critical and evaluative ironic effect is not only produced in the interaction between producer and recipient, but also in the interaction between what has objectively been "said" and the "unsaid," which is the implied meaning of this utterance, because "[i]rony rarely involves a simple decoding of a single inverted message; [...] it is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings" (*Irony* 89). The emphasis on the importance of both context and intertext, which is further stressed through the necessity of "markers" that serve the "'meta-ironic' function" of alerting the audience to the irony ahead (*Irony* 96), makes Hutcheon's concept of irony and parody especially productive for the definition and understanding of camp in pop-cultural contexts. For an analysis of camp, exaggeration and theatricality serve as examples of such markers easing communication between producers and audiences in the same "discursive community [...] constituted by shared concepts of norms of communication," such as gay communities or Gaga's Little Monsters (*Irony* 99).⁶ Therefore, the position of Lady Gaga's performances and videos in mainstream discourse and the familiar pictures, ideas and stereotypes make the critique one that functions similarly to Judith Butler's claim for the transgressive power of gender parody: "[...] to make gender trouble, not through the

strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posing as the foundational illusions of identity” (46). Lady Gaga’s thus defamiliarizes the familiar, rendering the seemingly normal abnormal, as camp “constantly draws attention to the artifices attendant on the construction of images of what is natural” (Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* 42). Thus, it can question the status of the polar opposite, namely the deviant, as queer pleasure and desire exemplify.

The notion of queer pleasure brings us back to pop divas and the question of why camp artists have such a strong connection to queer fans, while conservative critics dismiss them.⁷ As Ken Feil notes, “camp involves a queer parody of dominant culture’s deficiencies. This project amounts to a rebellious type of pleasure because it stresses the triumph of queerness against the limitations of the social world” (484). Part of this queer, rebellious type of pleasure in Lady Gaga’s pop art stems—in keeping with camp’s connection to queer genders—from her how her work defies the notions of essentialism, identity and originality. By refusing to acknowledge any identity behind the endlessly reproduced image of the artist and instead “reducing” her identity to clothes, masks and wigs, she constantly foregrounds the performativity of (artistic) identity and gender performance. In my analysis, Lady Gaga’s use of camp strategies and playful engagement with pop culture’s tropes makes room for the aforementioned “queer pleasure.” Such tropes appear in her live shows, culminating in *The Monster Ball Tour*, and in her music video productions such as the 10 minute-clip for the song “Telephone.” This analysis relates Gaga to her pop predecessors such as Andy Warhol, Judy Garland and Madonna, and their respective queer legacy.

Pulp, Performance, Parody—Gaga’s Work in Context

The function of camp in Lady Gaga’s work can be a means of creative re-signification as well as of critique and transgression. Both strategies would signify a queer surplus value. Among the most obvious tie-ins with queer discourses in Gaga’s *œuvre* is the rejection of a stable gendered and sexual identity. Slipping effortlessly between female and male drag, between cone-bras and strap-ons, gay male S/M-sex scenes and lesbian make-out sessions in her videos and public appearances, Lady Gaga refuses to be defined by her sexuality—a fate common to most other female pop stars. Her over-the-top artificiality of her costumes seldom distinguishes between on- and off-stage

clothing or private and star persona, which brings to mind Susan Sontag's claim that camp conceives of "being as playing a role" (56). The idea of role-play is central to camp's historic connection to predominantly gay and queer audiences as Jack Babuscio describes. He argues that camp is always closely connected with "gay sensibility" (19), for the development of which the necessity of passing for straight in a hostile environment is one important trigger.⁸ According to Babuscio, this experience of passing heightens awareness of the theatricality of everyday life. Richard Dyer picks up this idea and concludes that the "gay sensibility" and consequently camp as well "hold together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity [...] intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling and a deprecating sense of its absurdity" ("Judy Garland and Gay Men" 163). Even though Dyer refers to the diva-worshipping of Judy Garland and her contemporaries more than thirty years ago, his words transfer easily to Lady Gaga, most notably to her relation to and interaction with fans at concerts.

"The Monster Ball" alludes to voguing balls in its name and to stage musicals. It evokes community, kinship, and non-biological family ties of the freaks and outsiders, in this case known as Little Monsters, into a Broadway show-act. This contradiction between seriousness and the extravagant, between a certain superficiality and deep concern, creates the paradoxical effect Dyer attributes to camp appreciation. Christopher Isherwood describes the anti-ethical quality of camp in his novel *The World in the Evening* (1954), where one of his fictional characters claims "You can't camp about something you don't take seriously" (110).⁹ Isherwood frames this definition by the story of isolation that a gay character in a rural area feels, his need for a feeling of connection to others and the search for a way to express himself. The novel "describe[s] camp as strategy of self-identification, [...] by associating it with the politics of marginality and by emphasizing the communal empowerment that the strategy enforces" (Dennishoff 135). "The Monster Ball" borrows this theme and thus becomes one of the most notable examples of the strategic use of camp in Lady Gaga's *œuvre* to achieve queer pleasure. Divided into four acts set in New York City, titled City, Subway, Forest, and Monster Ball, the story of *The Monster Ball Tour* is ripe with over-the-top imagery. A short video introduces each of the four parts,¹⁰ which in stark contrast to the colorful live act itself is shot in either black and white or unsaturated colors. Jarring visual effects such as a gush of turquoise disrupt the almost sterile aesthetic of the interludes, which performance artist Millie Brown ostensibly vomits onto Lady Gaga's dress, or dark red blood pouring from a heart Lady Gaga seems to devour. Staccato-like editing of the clips further emphasize the contrast between these interludes and the playful live-show that make the body of Lady Gaga and other protagonists rhythmically match their house/electro

score, distancing the interludes from the pop-centric show. The bodies in these interludes are disjointed or merge into the backgrounds to become inseparable from their environment and unrecognizable as humans. They function as mere stand-ins for lifeless fashion mannequins and as ornamental features for the already highly abstract imagery. Against this extremely artificial and cool background, the live parts of the show, which are characterized by overtly emotional confessions, highly sexualized bodies and intertextual references to both queer-coded and nostalgic cultural artifacts, become even more legible as a camp spectacular, since “camp [...] thrives on mischievous incongruity” (Medhurst 158).

The show opens at its most dramatic with a panic and pain evoking guttural scream by Lady Gaga from the song “Dance in the Dark.” As the opening video fades away and the neon signs of the city-scenery appear, Lady Gaga is a shadow on the top of a staircase. The scenery is reminiscent of a run-down former amusement area, a Times Square for has-beens so to speak, where instead of fashionable consumer products, bold letters advertise whiplashes, death cases, and car accidents. BBQ and “good food” are on equal footing with liquor and drugs, as are sedation, implants and dentistry, which all seem to be available at the same place right around the corner of “Hotel (T)Hass.”¹¹ Pop culture’s obsession with decay on the one side and beauty on the other, or more precisely the decay of beauty — a recurring theme in Lady Gaga’s work — is thus written into *The Monster Ball Tour* from the very beginning. The opening number “Dance in the Dark” picks up this thematic emphasis, as the song is dedicated to a number of mainly female celebrities (with the exception of the legendary Las Vegas entertainer Liberace) who were crushed by their image and the expectations that came with it. Lady Di, Sylvia Plath, Marilyn Monroe, the child beauty pageant participant JonBenét Ramsey, and Judy Garland all died tragically before their time, either by suicide, murder or other “fame-related complications.” Gaga also refers to their infamous double-lives, where personal struggles such as bulimia, drug-addiction or homosexuality on the one and public persona on the other hand had to be kept separate at all costs. Matching both this idea of duplicity and the atmosphere of stage design, for most of the song only Lady Gaga’s motionless silhouette can be seen behind a gauze screen. At the end of the song, she descends a staircase with handrails made of injection needles in a pants-less purple costume with giant shoulder pads. The scene both evokes and parodies a common show business trope, the classical diva entrance such as Norma Desmond’s, the aging star in *Sunset Boulevard*, while the needles serve as a reference to both drug abuse and plastic surgery. “Dance in the Dark” furthermore connects its commentary on fame and public pressure with a more general examination of women’s potentially destructive body image. Low self-esteem due

to a lack of positive role models and isolation as well as condescending and judgmental messages from a patriarchal environment leaves women feeling either unattractive or slutty. A neon sign literally states this sexy/ugly-divide, but it also manifests in the song succession, which places the bleak “Dance in the Dark” back-to-back with Lady Gaga’s breakthrough hit and disco anthem “Just Dance.” Positioning Lady Gaga as both the vulnerable protagonist of “Dance in the Dark” as well as the careless drunk party-goer of “Just Dance,” *The Monster Ball Tour* not only rejects the rigid distinction between these female archetypes, but through this accentuated role-play foreshadows a burlesque-inspired female mimicry, which characterizes the rest of the show.¹² Furthermore, in this constellation and context, “Just Dance” rises from shallow pop song to sign of empowerment, mirroring Mark Booth’s assertion that camp involves “being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal [object] merits [in dominant discourses]” (69). In connection to the aspects of gender parody, which are visible in Lady Gaga’s stage show, the merit of camp in turn lies in “show[ing] that gender should be a game, something we play at. [...] Camp allows us to not take ourselves too seriously while exposing the violence and oppression implicit in all gender enforcement” (Eisner 262).

Whereas the interludes are full of violence directed at bodies and restrictions against their free movement and expression, the live-show features humorous and playful feminine and queer masquerade that revels in exaggerated stereotypes and the artificiality of gender and social roles. Many of the parodied roles are borrowed from musicals, which is especially noteworthy insofar as Steven Cohan finds “[...] the open acknowledgement in musicals that masculinity and femininity are equally performative, and that this performativity has spectacle as its intent” (xvi).¹³ From the *Grease*-inspired “Just Dance” costumes and stage design, *The Monster Ball Tour* develops into a distorted *Wizard of Oz* tribute. Distorted, because the destination is not Auntie Em’s farmhouse or another stand-in for a traditional home, but rather the Monster Ball, which is closer do the freak-populated Emerald City than Kansas. Niall Richardson describes the moral of *The Wizard of Oz*, which regards as “one of the most popular road movies ever,” as follows:

[...] Dorothy resolves her Oedipal drama, finds her family and attains traditional subjectivity [...] Dorothy yearns for Auntie Em and her secure home life and, arguably, the film’s camp popularity exists because gay men, like Dorothy, feel marginalized from mainstream domesticity and therefore enjoy the fantasy of returning to, and gaining acceptance within, traditional culture [56].

Yet as camp’s function in popular culture has changed and taken on more queer than gay connotation, a camp re-telling of Dorothy’s adventures must

also change the moral of the story — the crucial difference being that “queers resist the regimes of the normal. It implies that we redefine the problem of homosexual liberation so that we no longer fight intolerance but resist normalization” (Escoffier 175). Where *The Wizard of Oz* aimed for acceptance and inclusion by whatever was deemed to be “normal,” the story and style of “The Monster Ball” instead do not look or turn back to any kind of traditional home or family and instead head for a place beyond any vision of the normal, where being free in the company of kindred spirits is the goal rather than being accepted by any authorial figure or the heteronormative majority. This vision of freedom, however, is not only projected onto a distant and abstract place at the end of the road. Rather, journey as well as traveler already symbolize freedom from social restraints, as Gaga herself exemplifies who — while impersonating a dominatrix or nun, wearing an orbit or practically nothing — uses the Neo-Burlesque technique of impersonating femininity with a twist, thereby making the undress a tease and consequently a symbol of being in control of one’s own body and sexuality. Thus, her performance highlights the artificiality of what has come to stand for “female” much like that of a drag queen, yet with Lady Gaga being a biological woman her critique becomes even more potent as she as the appropriation of drag strategies amounts to a revolt against sexual binaries.¹⁴

Among the most clearly marked feminine roles in “The Monster Ball” is that of Tinker Bell, the fairy from J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, made famous by the Disney animated film. As such, she quickly gained “family-friendly” nostalgic connotations similar to those of *The Wizard of Oz*.¹⁵ Yet a queer reevaluation of Tinker Bell reminiscent of Dorothy’s camp reclaiming has also occurred.¹⁶ Lady Gaga evokes both dimension of the Tinker Bell character when she lies on the stage in a black leather outfit and fake blood smeared over her throat and arms, and then turns to the audience to say:

“Do you think I’m sexy? ’Cause I think you’re sexy.

[*audience clapping and screaming*]

I don’t believe you. Do you think I’m sexy?

You know I’m kinda like Tinker Bell. If you don’t clap for her, she dies.

Do you want me to die?” [“The Monster Ball Tour”].

Gaga’s reincarnation of Tinker Bell, contrary to the persona established in the well-known film, speaks for herself and actively solicits the attention and validation she needs to survive. The incongruous combination of the sweet and mute fairy’s background with her sex-positive and outspoken rendition is both a dismissing comment on the child-woman ideal that Disney’s Tinker Bell represents, as well as a gesture symbolic of Gaga’s status as a star, insofar as the scene puts the power into the clapping hands of her fans. Thus, the

episode further strengthens the communal aspect of the show by parodying the idea of and redefining the boundaries of sexiness queerly to include a rumored-to-be hermaphrodite in a bondage costume. Yet “The Monster Ball” does not completely discard the image of the sparkling and winged fairy, true to Isherwood’s dictum that “you can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it” (110). Fulfilling the expectation raised by the “glitter way” reference to *Wizard of Oz*’s yellow-brick-road in the beginning, the concert features the film’s iconic twister in the form of a giant tube of screens, lowered onto the stage.¹⁷

“Oh, what’s that thing way up in the sky? It’s very beautiful but very strange. Is it rainbow? No. Ohh, I don’t feel so well. Little Monster ... I’m feeling very strange.
Oh no, it’s a twister!” [“The Monster Ball”].

In this scene, Gaga takes on the role of the naïve child-like woman again, marking the connection to Dorothy as well as the film’s queer status through referencing Dorothy’s signature song. Yet when Gaga re-emerges from the eye of the storm, her outfit does not resemble Dorothy’s dull dress, rather it is an extravagant re-interpretation of the fairy-like Glinda, good witch of the North. The result is the so-called “Living Dress,” inspired by Hussein Chalayan and designed by costume designer Vin Burnham, which earns its name from a system of mechanical components that can be remote-controlled to move different parts of the dress, as well as the respective headpiece and wings. During the song “So Happy I Could Die,” Lady Gaga merges these two characters, lost Dorothy and Glinda, who is not only a mighty sorceress, but also the decisive figure, who lets Dorothy know about her powers and how she can use them (even if it is only to get home). The episode resonates with the overall story arc of being self-sufficient in one’s way to freedom and personal growth, while delivering the most awe-inspiring and show-stopping sight of the evening, or as Isherwood ended his definition of camp, “you’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (110). Most striking about “The Monster Ball” from a camp and queer perspective is not only its frequent recourse to cultural artifacts with an inherent gay appeal, but even more importantly the underlying seriousness of the show despite its superficial flamboyance and visual extravagance. Illustrating Linda Hutcheon’s stand on irony and ambiguity as opposite rather than connected, “The Monster Ball” is never ambiguous in its artistic and political message. The show takes a firm stand towards what is to be expected at the end of the glitter way. It reveals in the monstrous community despite or maybe even because of its frequent tongue-in-cheek moments and humorous components. The rejection of any normalizing authority regarding gender, sexuality and

morals is never compromised. This relates queer Lady Gaga back to gay Judy Garland, who was just as likely as Lady Gaga “to share the insider jokes [...]. The one thing Garland never kidded, however, was ‘Over the Rainbow.’ She knew the complex and highly personal associations the song had for many in her audience, and she never distanced herself from those emotions” (Jennings 100). Lady Gaga follows a similarly appreciative rationale not only in her live-shows of which “The Monster Ball” is a prime example, but also in her interviews, tweets and music videos. The latter rely equally heavily on camp, yet due to the less direct mode of communication, they add to the aforementioned “triumph of queerness” not so much through community-building aspects. Instead her music videos serve to even more overtly criticize modes of representation and hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality. As is the case in “The Monster Ball,” Gaga’s videos feature a plethora of intertexts with specific queer and gay resonance to that effect. Yet it is not only of interest what they refer to both visually and narratively, but more importantly, how these texts are recycled and infused with an additional evaluative and critical edge — which, as previously mentioned, signifies meaning-making as compared to mere humor and meaningless pastiche.

Camp achieves this edge by “laying bare the devices.” Via the over-the-top exaggeration of images and structures as well as a foregrounding of the artificiality of the presented, camp renders the mundane incredible. This is the basic premise, for example, of “feminist camp” as Pamela Robertson suggests in her book *Guilty Pleasures-Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Robertson, one the most influential scholars to apply Butler’s idea concerning gender parody to a camp analysis of popular media, advances the argument that women can — despite camp’s historical roots in predominately gay male subculture — “reclaim camp as a political tool and rearticulate it within the theoretical framework of feminism,” since “camp offers a model for critiques of gender and sex roles” (6). The basis for this re-articulation is her model of female masquerade, where the “credibility of images of the feminine can be undermined by a ‘double-mimesis’ or ‘parodic mimicry’” (10). Though Robertson herself limits her discussion of this parodic mimicry to straight women and does not go into the possibility of lesbian camp at length, her work still constitutes an important reference point for thinking about female queer viewing practices. Robertson argues that camp functions not only as a distancing device for female spectators, but also as a way to enhance the pleasure that they can derive from cultural products, which may not at first appear to either liberate or to empower. Camp allows for both the potentially misogynistic, homophobic, or merely normative mainstream entertainment on the one hand and the critical distance toward depictions on screen/video/radio on the other, to coexist and interact with one another.

Camp can be a form of “detached attachment” in the audience, which is made possible by camp’s overthrowing of hierarchies of form and content. The seemingly trivial form produces an altogether new content and thereby a new level of potentially resistive consumption. A camp reading thus relies on the audience’s ability to not only notice, for example, the clichéd and repetitive narratives of Mae West’s films or their reliance on old-fashioned sexual innuendo, but also how their use of excessive style functions as an evaluative marker of distance to the employed norms.¹⁸ This is, of course, not only true for moments of spectatorship itself, but has a lasting effect and will — like all consumption of art — influence future encounters with similar images, sounds and stories. Consequently, Lady Gaga’s choice of pre-texts is significant for her camp reading and its critical potential, especially with regards to pop cultural texts and concepts. One particularly interesting example for such “laying bare” and “over-performing” strategies is the setting and theme of her collaboration with Beyoncé for the song “Telephone.” The video is a remake of *lesploitation*-films, drawing on the clichéd and sexualized images from a string of “girls behind bars”-B-movies.¹⁹ Like other exploitation films, most prominently the genres *blaxploitation* and *sexploitation*, the *lesploitation*-film was constructed around minority issues and fringe topics presumably for the titillation and viewing pleasure of the white straight male. The *lesploitation*-genre in particular was based on the objectification of women’s bodies and female — especially lesbian — sexuality, the trivialization of violence against women, and the impossibility of meaningful bonding among women.²⁰ Since these characteristics are to varying extents still defining features of current pop culture, the combination of this theme with the collaboration of two of the most successful and influential contemporary female pop artists is revealing. With *lesploitation*, the creative team behind “Telephone” chose a theme that has already been re-appropriated by queer, namely lesbian audiences. The process is comparable to the on-going cult-success of 50’s gay and lesbian pulp novels whose colorful and sensationalistic covers can be seen as an inspiration for the sets and costumes of “Telephone.” Pulp’s cultural significance as camp, however, stems from the interaction between the attention-grabbing covers and even shallow literary quality with their often serious content:

Even as these texts were instrumental in creating certain stereotypes (or, conversely, archetypes) of queerness, which were often internalized and made iconic — for better or worse — by the gay and lesbian audiences, their very lack of respectability allowed them to perform the iconoclastic function of presenting, if only obliquely, subversively positive images [Smith 1999 xxi].

In portraying the lesbian femme in “Telephone,” whose image was made popular in mainstream culture by exactly these pulp novels, Lady Gaga also

adds another significant component to the ever growing array of gender performances expressed in her photo shoots as well as on stage and screen, ranging from hyper-femininity to androgyny and conflating lesbian femme and drag queen, stud and true lady.²¹ Complementing the recurring habit of gender parody in Gaga's *œuvre*, the "Telephone" video emphasizes the potential for queer pleasure in the genre in several ways: it casts butch performance artist Heather Cassils as the object of the protagonist's desire who defies both genre and cultural norms through her female masculinity; it installs two female bodybuilders as guards, who, however, are not either sadistic or lonely outsiders like their counterparts in the original texts; it brings the female gaze into the foreground via shots of female onlookers.²² Perhaps most importantly, the video adds the lesbian happy ending most of the traditional lesploitation films lack, when Gaga and Beyoncé drive off into the sunset together. Tavia Nyong'o summarizes the appeal of this approach by stating that "what is innovative about "Telephone" is its upending of the heterosexual fantasies that underpinned both the archive of mainstream representation and so many of its intentionally offensive and transgressive alternatives" ("Iphone"). Another important source for the "rebellious type of pleasure" (Feil 484) one can derive from the video lies in its over-the-top visual design, which at times produces a narrative counteracting or at least complicating the plot and the stereotypes it employs. Having Lady Gaga arrive in a low-cut latex-suit, for example, sporting stripes otherwise known from early prison uniforms, undercuts the supposed innocence and naïveté of the "new girl," which the normative "girls behind bars"-storyline requires. The clothing accentuates how "Telephone" deviates significantly from the genre's original plot line: the new inmate is actually already known to be guilty, since the audience has witnessed the character's cold-blooded murder of her abusive boyfriend in the "Paparazzi" video to which "Telephone" serves as sequel. While wearing a yellow Mickey-Mouse-costume, which mocks the infantilizing tendencies of pop culture, and drinking her signature tea, a symbol of both aristocracy and aloofness, the main character "Paparazzi" had shown no sign of remorse or guilt during the poisoning. Whereas the lesploitation film tries to uphold the image of the ultimately available and seemingly — at least in the beginning — tamable young girl, "Telephone" instead starts with Lady Gaga as an established criminal. In other scenes, the video does not directly contradict but rather exaggerates what the lesploitation-genre accepts as a given: the glamorization and sexualization of life behind bars. The effect, however, is everything but reassuring for the originally implied straight male viewer, if one takes a closer look for example at the cage-dance sequence. It occurs as one of only three dance-parts in the ten-minute long "Telephone" short film and thus resembles the occasional dance-number in film musicals. In the first of these three scenes

Gaga dances seductively in the prison hall, her movements mimicked by scantily clad and conventionally attractive female backup dancers. Their dance choreography is, however, interrupted by scenes depicting Lady Gaga as the victim of a crime, or rather her body as a living crime scene as she is wrapped in “crime scene, do not cross” barrier tape, whose limbs still move rhythmically to the music in a fashion to what could be seen in “The Monster Ball” interludes.

The unsettling combination of violence against and the objectification of the female body repeat in the other two dance sequences as well, once when Gaga and Beyoncé dance in a pool of dead bodies and again when Lady Gaga prepares poison for a mass-murder. In all three scenes, Gaga represents a stereotype of women’s conventional presentation in the media: the sexy stripper, the devoted housewife, the chaste Wonder Woman. All three figures are constituted through costume, hair, setting, and makeup in a way that underlines their constructedness and through their close connection to violence in the video, also their inherently oppressive nature. While thus subverting the allure of conventional ideas about gender identity and desire, the video at the same time makes room for positive depictions of queer desires and gender performances, which the genre — and by extension today’s media — often tries to repress. The genre of the *lesploitation* film especially lends itself to the discussion of gender expressions and women’s depiction in popular media, because

while men do appear [...], this is a [...] genre, where relationships between women are paramount. Differences between women are stressed, as if to take the place usually occupied by gender: differences between butch and femme personae, differences in age, differences between types of crime (particularly prostitution versus everything else), physical differences [Mayne 127].

These various kinds of differences between female protagonists are reflected in “Telephone,” where men appear only in minor roles as such as backup dancers, diner guests and as another abusive boyfriend, this time Beyoncé’s, who is quickly killed. Women, however, are represented in all shapes and sizes and several constellations of power, antagonism, friendship and desire without being devaluated or played off against each other. Rather than using the wardens’ nonconforming bodybuilder-physique to divert from Lady Gaga’s own rumored sex deviation, the video stresses the connection between these different kinds of women as gender outlaws. At the same time, the video portrays as attractive what heteronormative culture would reject, such as androgynous and muscular Heather Cassils or curvy women of color in the prison yard, while placing conventionally attractive women, such as Gaga’s female dancers or even Beyoncé herself in situations and contexts that diminish

or problematize their potential sexual allure. Thus “Telephone” inverts the power dynamics of media reception, where the empowering or queer reading of such products as exploitation films are relegated as “readings against the grain” or appropriations. Here, by contrast, any straight reading would be forced to justify itself as a valid re-appropriation. This is especially visible if “Telephone” is compared to the preceding collaboration between these two performers, Beyoncé’s “Video Phone.” Based on their lyrics, the two songs can be opposing treatments of a common theme in pop, namely the supposed availability of women. “Video Phone” invites the implied male partner to make use of advanced communication technology in order observe (and control) Beyoncé at will, while “Telephone” reminds him that even smartphones can be switched off and that Gaga defines the conditions of her availability herself. These contrasting messages are mirrored in the respective videos, as “Video Phone” consists almost exclusively of dance sequences by either Beyoncé alone or supported by Lady Gaga, whose male onlookers, albeit slightly abstracted through their heads merging with lenses and cameras, feature prominently in the video. Thus, the video’s art direction further underlines the privileging of the male viewing pleasure already laid out in the lyrics. “Telephone” in turn complicates questions of the gaze, in part by adding a narrative in which women are the driving force rather than ornamental accessories. The only intradiegetic video of Gaga is showing her leaving the prison as if strutting down a runway. The other “recordings” are Polaroid pictures that Gaga takes of herself and Beyoncé. These can be read in two ways. On the one hand, they are blatant product placement for a brand for which Gaga has recently been chosen as Creative Director, thereby underscoring her status as influential business woman even inside the narrative of the music clip. On the other hand, the Polaroid Pictures refer to another iconic, if again unusual, road movie, namely *Thelma & Louise* (1991). As such, the pictures of Gaga and Beyoncé are not meant to be seen primarily by men. In reference to the intertext that they evoke, they are instead taken to capture a moment of female bonding. But whereas a picture is all that remains of the heroines in the original road movie, in Telephone the Polaroids serve to capture the fleetingness and spontaneity of a moment, which in contrast to *Thelma & Louise* does not stand for defiance through self-annihilation, but for triumph repression. Thus “Telephone” pays homage to and positively retells a watershed-story of 90’s progressive “girl power” culture, while also manipulating its idea about women and their limited access to freedom and mobility.²³

A similar method is used in the video’s treatment of another film that also combines the genres of rape-revenge and road movie, both flawed in their usefulness for creating filmic spaces for women. Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* is referenced not only through the story of an abused woman who goes

on a killing spree, but also through the use of film's most iconic prop, the Pussy Wagon. Yet "Telephone" brings the Pussy Wagon closer again to its original meaning as a ridiculous, but ultimately endearing "chick magnet" from the musical *Grease* than the negative connotations it took on in Tarantino's film, where it serves a constant visual reminder of the female protagonist's sexual exploitation.²⁴ While Tarantino used the Pussy Wagon as a cynical joke at the women's expense, "Telephone" makes the car exemplify freedom, mobility and unity between the female couple. This re-signification is further underscored visually, as the pink and yellow pickup with huge flame ornaments in *Kill Bill* is a comment on the owner's lack of taste and a kind of comic relief. In the stylized, bright colored aesthetics of "Telephone," however, the car blends in — its literalized purpose written onto the car perfectly complementing Gaga's and Beyoncé's figurative costumes. The reclaiming of the car as a feminist space, or rather the subversion of the car as a predominantly masculine space in film and popular media is additionally achieved via Lady Gaga's wearing of an otherwise out-of-context leopard-print catsuit. The costume evokes the one worn by Shania Twain in the video for her song "That Don't Impress Me Much," another version of the independent woman favored by 90's pop culture. Yet whereas Shania Twain's progressive image of modern womanhood depended on her free choice of which ride to take as a hitchhiker, "Telephone" has Lady Gaga dance in front of a pickup truck that either she or "Honey B" (Beyoncé's character in the video) owns. By connecting "Telephone" aesthetically with these references to patriarchy, heterosexuality, and pop-cultural ideals of femininity, the narration strengthens the queer subtext, as the already implicit romantic pairing of its leading female character is positioned in relation to and opposition with patterns of heterosexual gender relations. Thus, the visual allusions suggest reading Gaga's and Beyoncé's characters as in a relationship, which ties in with the significance of Beyoncé's ethnic marking as correlating to exploitation's treatment of race, as Judith Mayne suggests that "[...] the opposition of black women and white women is eroticized" in the genre (138). "Telephone," however, does not limit itself to a lesbian reading, but stresses the queer performativity of gender and sexuality by tying in the lesbian couple with Gore Vidal's most famous literary (and later filmic) creation, the transsexual character Myra Breckinridge. According to Dennis Altman, the film *Myra Breckinridge* (1970) "was part of a major cultural assault on the assumed norms of gender and sexuality which swept the Western world in the late 1960s and early 1970s [...]" (132). Its titular character is introduced into the world of "Telephone" via the quoting of its most iconic costume, namely the stars and stripes bikini outfit revived by Gaga's and Beyoncé's costumes in the video's third dance sequence. Especially given Gaga's own precarious status as multi-gendered woman, the ref-

erence is both daring and humorous, as it creates an string of gender deferrals: Lady Gaga poses as a hermaphrodite, who passes as a woman, who is playing a lesbian that is mimicking a transsexual man, who passes as a woman modeled on the asexual Wonder Woman. A reading of the *Myra Breckinridge* original comes to the conclusion that “[...] through its camp conventions the novel queers these heterosexual acts, reminding us of the queers who exist in its margins — and who must be erased by the end” (Eisner 267). Yet the contemporary performance of Myra, as well as of numerous other icons, figures, and characters from the above mentioned films and texts, lack any tragic components, specifically a tragic ending, which changes their function entirely. Gender deviants in “Telephone” no longer serve as foils against which to posit the “healthy” alternative, a heteronormative lifestyle. Rather, they are represented as the alternative themselves when what dominant discourses with much media support have deemed “good” and “normal” is exposed as artificial and/or oppressive. In outrageous costumes, wigs and masks, the music video’s protagonists, above all Gaga herself, enact the significance of camp

as a “queer performativity,” through which a subjectivity is enacted that takes not the heterosexist imperatives of sexually and ideologically self-reproductive, marriage-sanctioned, sexuality as its exemplary performative act (as in what we might label “orthodox,” or “straight” performativity), but rather the queer deviation, and demystification, of those very imperatives [Cleto 32].

Reveling in the seemingly shallow and stereotypical, exaggerating known forms and conventions, and taking sexism and objectification to its extreme, Lady Gaga’s work achieves to place an ironic, demystifying parody at the heart of pop culture. Via camp, it re-appropriates mainstream discourses and makes room for the unsettling, disturbing, and in turn, empowering and queer. This use of camp “operates as an aggressive metamorphosing operation, attacking norms of behavior, appearance, and art to revel in their inherent artifice” (Klinger 135). Just as the “Telephone” video’s “prison for bitches” — i.e. the gender deviants and unruly women — cannot actually contain its transgressive inmates, so mainstream media discourse, too, is unable to hold its inherent queer potential at bay as the video, and Gaga’s artistic output generally shows.

Gaga for Pop’s Giants: The Truth Isn’t Out (There)

Lady Gaga’s rootedness in a pop ancestry made up partially of other “unruly women” was beautifully demonstrated when she appeared at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards ceremony for what was to become one of her most

shocking appearances in a dress made entirely out of raw meat. As she climbed the stairs to the stage to accept her award for “Bad Romance” as Best Video of The Year, she handed her meat purse to Cher, who was dressed in a fishnet costume reminiscent of the one which had received similar reactions of outrage and critique twenty years earlier — at the time the see-through dress even got her strongly homoerotic video for *If I Could Turn Back Time* banned from *MTV*. Standing side by side on the *MTV* stage in dresses emblematic of the evolution of what is and has been deemed “shocking” on national TV, Cher and Gaga served as a stunning visual reminder of the at times paradoxical demands of the entertainment industry. Award shows and video productions continue to expect its female stars in particular to look sexy, while at the same time never to transgress the rather arbitrary line of decency and good taste. Insofar as “[...] camp is a method by which the hegemony is queered, denaturalized, and thus, subverted through *over-articulation*” (Devitt “Girl on Girl” 32, emphasis mine), both Cher’s overtly revealing vintage fishnet costume, as well as Gaga’s quite literal interpretation of the demand for more “naked flesh” are critical responses to pop culture’s interpolation.

Lady Gaga and her work appear even more firmly in line with a pop ancestry via the defiance of any notion of artistic or gendered “truth” and assumed authenticity. The connection to this exact pop history in turn influences how critics read her and underscores the community-strengthening code character of her persona and performances. As she herself acknowledged in numerous interviews, her art would be unreadable, maybe even unthinkable without prominent predecessors ranging from Pop Art and Glam Rock to feminist camp icons.²⁵ Of course, a critique of her work should not depend solely on those names referred to in magazines or referenced in style and attitude. Yet taking into account that figures such as Andy Warhol, Grace Jones, David Bowie, Queen, Madonna and Cher and texts like *Caged Heat*, *The Wizard of Oz* or the films of New Queer Cinema that heavily influenced the aesthetics of “Alejandro,” for example, considered an important part of contemporary queer discourse and identity, her references to these pop icons cannot be underestimated in their appeal to and identificatory potential for her fans.

Yet, were Gaga’s work limited to simple imitation and quotation, the sum of it would amount to mere pastiche, and thus actually diminish the critical potential of her work. Instead the references together with her exaggerated aesthetics function in a similar way to Linda Hutcheon’s meta-ironic markers, as they suggest the question to the performance’s audience that Sedgwick describes as the camp-realization in contrast to kitsch-attribution, “What if the right audience for this were exactly me?” (qtd. in Tinkcom 46). This establishment of a specific queer context enables her strategic use of camp, in

which the methods of former practitioners of camp are updated. The use of allusions is essential even, since “if camp ‘is’ something, it is the crisis of identity, of depth, and of *gravity*. Not a stable code, therefore, but rather a discourse produced by the friction with and among other discourses [...]” (Cleto 34).

The invention of the Candy Warhol-character for the interludes of the first concert tour, aptly titled *The Fame Ball*, exemplifies this process of combining different references and discourses to create meaning not at either end of the given spectrum, but in the interplay between the different points of reference. The figure presents itself as a combination of pop artist Andy Warhol and his transgender muse and actress, Candy Darling. By merging creator and creation in Lady Gaga as Candy Warhol, the creative minds behind The Haus of Gaga, take Warhol’s idea that everyone can become famous to the logical extreme that anyone can make themselves famous, while at the same time The Haus can be understood as an advancement of Warhol’s factory. Whereas the name “factory” still kept the private and public sphere apart by alluding to the difference between living and working spaces (Lobel 44), the Haus disclaims such traditional notions and brings the concept of actively produced identities even into the most private spaces when re-named Bath House of Gaga in the video for “Bad Romance.” A critical approach to fame and the role of celebrities reflected in this re-working of Warhol also appears in the music of Gaga itself. Her use of Auto-Tune is specifically interesting in this regard, as this technique is most commonly used in pop music to digitally enhance the quality of a performer’s voice.²⁶ Yet as Gaga’s voice does not necessarily need digital enhancement, her extensive use of Auto-Tune in some of her songs, such as “Just Dance,” adds another feature to her conscious performance of pop. The technique has become one significant part of pop music and has often been pointed out as a sign of to the demise of “real stars/real talents.” For Gaga, however, altering her voice with Auto-Tune is not the last straw she is clinging to in her attempt to strike the right tone, but merely another form of masquerade, which further connects her Cher, who introduced the extensive use of Auto-Tune in one of her biggest hits, “Believe” (1999). In her discussion of the song, its technical aspects, as well as its success among gay fans, Kay Dickinson establishes the combination of Auto-Tune and female pop-voices as one way of expressing camp aesthetics aurally, as it expresses “a certain delight in the inauthentic, in things which are obviously pretending to be what they are not” (34). Lyrically, this notion resurfaces in Warhol’s quotation about celebrity culture, “I love Hollywood. They’re beautiful. Everybody’s plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic,” in one of Lady Gaga’s most overtly meta-referential songs, “Paparazzi.” The integration of Hollywood iconography as the hallmark of celebrity, fame and

glamour is as paramount in Gaga's work as it had been in Warhol's, whose images "force viewers seriously to consider what happens beneath the iconography of commodity fetishism" (Dyer, J. 34).

It is important to note, however, that glamour itself may already contain subversive elements as historically, "[...] in many contexts a desire for glamour represented an audacious refusal to be imprisoned by norms of class and gender, or by expectations of conventional femininity" (Dyhouse 3), hence the connection of many female camp icons from Mae West, Greta Garbo and Judy Garland to Cher and Madonna to glamour. Lady Gaga's outlandish clothes as well as her frequent collaborations with well-known artists have helped to establish an equally glamorous image, which combine with her almost daily change of style and leads to frequent comparisons with the Queen of Pop, Madonna.

Pamela Robertson, whose discussion of Madonna's subversive value remains rather ambiguous, nonetheless accounts for Madonna's "cumulative image from her varied and multiple performances [...] as a kind of meta-masquerade" (125–26). Though Robertson relates this masquerade only to Madonna's feminist value, it connects to Judith Butler's remarks on performative subjectivity and how they relate to Warhol's practice of producing similar, but never identical images and portraits. Pop-divas' constant self-reinvention as well as Warhol's varying copies, while formulated on different levels, have in common that they leave "a trace of difference to queer subjectivity" (Dyer, "The Metaphysics of the Mundane" 55). They alert their audience to the fact that "formative matrices, such as political systems or discursive structures, cannot completely articulate the subject" (55). In an interview accompanying a photo shoot, in which she is seen without a bra, but with the silhouette of a strap-on clearly visible beneath her pants, Gaga illustrates his theme and comments on the press' obsession with the "truth" about celebrities and personal identity — as if there was such a thing:

Y'know, we always laugh when we get some major magazine and they're like [*high-camp voice*], So, the art direction of the shoot is: we want the worlds to see *the real you*. [...]. That's like saying [*whispers conspirationally*], "We know you're full of shit. But it's fine, *we* get it. So let's just cut the bullshit for one shoot. 'But you don't really wanna get to know me or photograph my soul, you want to do some version of what you already think I am and then expose something that you believe is hidden. When the truth is, me and my big fucking dick are all out there for you. But I'm not angry, I'm laughing. The joke is not on me, it's on *you*'" [Patterson 52].

Thus elevating a sex-toy to the status of identity signifier, Gaga once again articulates the "[...] opposition between authentic subjectivity and inauthentic society" (Suárez 134) that has been shown as characteristic of her work

and camp in general. Toying with gender parody, identity politics, artistic integrity and hegemonic sanctioning of the aforementioned, Lady Gaga's camp becomes both a mode of making room for queer humor, and subsequently pleasure, as well as a vehicle for serious critique of those hegemonic discourses that oppress alternative models of meaning-making. To accept Gaga's invitation "to follow the glitter way" thus means both to follow and acknowledge pop's equally glamorous, entertaining and subversive predecessors as well as to open oneself to radically new spaces for artistically and politically authentic expressions of queerness.

NOTES

1. For an exploration of how gay culture and resistance in the 60's was connected to Judy Garland and her status as gay icon, see Patricia Juliana Smith's "Icons and Iconoclasts."

2. For more on Garland's Carnegie Hall Concert, see Jennings.

3. Lady Gaga has performed a duet at Carnegie Hall with Sting for the *Rainforest Benefit Concert* in May 2010. For more information on the history and lasting influence of Judy Garland's performance at this venue, see Wade Jennings' article.

4. This queer notion of camp continues to exist side by side with colloquial understanding of camp as merely cultish appreciation of trash-phenomena, mostly influenced by Susan Sontag's quote: "The ultimate Camp statement: it's good because it's awful" (292).

5. Irony itself is not without its critics especially in postfeminist contexts. Rosalind Gill, for example, criticizes: "Most significantly, however, in postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of 'having it both ways,' of expressing sexist or homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironised form, while claiming this was not actually meant" (165).

6. Linda Hutcheon makes very clear in her argument that the producer of the text may not necessarily be the *intentional* producer of irony, when she states "there is no guarantee that the interpreter will 'get' the irony in the same way as it was intended. In fact, 'get' may be an inaccurate and even inappropriate verb: 'make' would be much more precise. [...] this productive, active process of attribution and interpretation itself involves an intentional act, one of interference" (*Irony* 11). Yet she stresses that irony is a form of communication, not of reading against the grain. The community-specific meta-ironic markers either are or are not embedded in a text/utterance and can insofar only be read as intentional code for irony by the interpreter.

7. Numerous examples for this distinction include a diverse spectrum of people, ranging from Oscar Wilde, Andy Warhol, David Bowie to New Queer Cinema and Madonna.

8. "I define the gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression, in short, a perception of the world which is colored, shared, directed, and defined by the fact of one's gayness" (Babuscio 19). Jack Babuscio's seemingly essentialist notion of gay (male) identity as the producer of camp is softened by his own acknowledgement that gay sensibility is not limited to gay identified men and that "this is not [...] to plead for the application of any narrow sociological analysis" (36). He also explicitly mentions the usefulness of camp for women (28).

9. Via the *The World in the Evening* (1954) character Charles Kennedy, who is confiding in the narrator about his relationship to Bob Wood.

10. This description refers to the second “re-vamped” version of *The Monster Ball Tour*, which has been performed from late 2009 until the end of the tour in 2011. The first leg of the tour had different stage design, other interludes and even slightly different costumes.

11. The name of the Hotel is written in a way that allows for both a reading as “*thass*,” a derogatory noun for the body part between thigh and ass, as well as the German word for *hate*, since Lady Gaga is known for incorporating European languages such as French and German into her work (i.e. “Bad Romance,” “Scheiße”).

12. One insightful discussion of the relation between (Neo)-Burlesque and femininity is Debra Ferreday’s “Showing the Girl.”

13. Stated even more bluntly: “By focusing on the gender ideal as a matter of aesthetics, mainstream musicals propound a view whereby femininity, say, is not an innate quality guaranteed to women but instead a special effect available to anyone with the proper skill and accessories” (Whitesell 273).

14. Devitt defends the use of the term “drag queen” to describe female-bodied performers who perform femininity, arguing that a definition of drag that relies on a “binary sex-based concept of crossing not only belies the rich wealth of gender identities that inform contemporary gender performance and drag but also reifies the naturalness of that binary” (Murphy 25).

15. According to the Library of Congress “[...] *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has become America’s greatest and best-loved homegrown fairytale. The first totally American fantasy for children, it is one of the most-read children’s books.”

16. As a fairy, which used to be a pejorative term for “gay,” Tinker Belle’s connection to gayness is so established that Sean Griffin decided to use her in the title of his monograph on the relationship between the Walt Disney Company and their gay and lesbian fans and employees *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*.

17. Lady Gaga explains the appearance as follows: “And so, as my friends and I travelled further and further down the glitter way, we ran into a magical angel with a beautiful black harp. And she said that she knew just the music to play to get us closer and closer to The Monster Ball.”

18. For a more detailed analysis of films which are considered camp, see Barbara Klinger’s book, in which she speaks of Sirkian melodramas as “mass camp.” Another example from the Classical Hollywood era would be the successful Freed Unit at MGM and their musicals (Tinkcom 36–72).

19. The genre of women-in-prison films reached its first heyday in the 50s according to film scholar Judith Mayne: “Throughout film history, there have been periods of ebb and flow of the popularity of the women-in-prison film. The genre was popular in the 1950s and less so in the 1960s; it re-emerged in the 1970s, and again in the late ’80’s and ’90’s. [...] Genealogies of the women-in-prison film usually cite *Caged* (1950) as the prototype of the genre [...]. In tracing the history of the women-in-prison film, one finds an interesting tension between the respectable, social problem film and the exploitative B-movie” (116–19).

20. One notable exception is *Caged Heat* (1974), a later example of the genre, which actually anticipates the positive ending of “Telephone”: “The film ends triumphantly, with the women successfully riding off into the sunset and the villains dead. However one feels about describing films from popular genres as ‘feminist,’ this is surely a conclusion that celebrates female solidarity” (Mayne 136).

21. “Historically, the term *femme* applied to and was adopted by lesbian and bisexual women; a *femme*, therefore, was a gay woman who ‘looked’ like ‘a girl’ or who identified with femininity. Over the course of the last three decades, however, the term has undergone a kind of postmodern renovation, resulting in its redefinition as a more broadly conceived *queering* of conventional/straight femininity and its adoption by people who are not necessarily female-born or female-bodied: transwomen, transmen, genderqueers, and even

butches. In other words, femme is now more commonly understood in queer communities as an act of gender—something one does to or with femininity, a means of both being queer and ‘doing’ femininity, an invested but critical *performance*” (Devitt 5).

22. “Female Gaze” is used here in reference to and contradiction with Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, which she defined as governing most films (and other audio-visual media).

23. For an analysis of *Thelma & Louise* as itself already a parody and appropriation of filmic conventions, as well as of its subversive potential, see Birgit Däwes.

24. “You know that I ain’t bragging, she’s a real pussy wagon — greased lightnin,” lyrics of the song “Greased Lightning” from the movie *Grease* (1978).

25. See interviews with Sylvia Patterson and Stephen Fry.

26. For a discussion of this trend, as well as its development see Josh Tyrangiel’s article for *Time Magazine* entitled “Auto-Tune: Why Pop Music Sounds Perfect.”