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Camping with the Stars: Queer Perfomativity, Pop Intertextuality, and Camp in the Pop Art of Lady Gaga

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Understanding the particularity of popular culture alters our glib assumptions that it is formulaic, that it always repeats the same messages, that it always tells the same stories and serves the same interests. (Jenkins 15)

1. Introduction—All Style, No Substance?

It seems indisputable that Lady Gaga, born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, is currently the pop industry's biggest sensation. Since her debut album *The Fame* has been released in late 2008, Lady Gaga has been nominated for four American Music Awards, three Brits and one Echo (plus a GLAAD Media award); she has won two Grammys, two People's Choice Awards and three MTV Video Music Awards. On top of that, she is the first artist ever to have four number one hit singles on a debut album. She has been interviewed by America's talk show darlings Ellen Degeneres, Oprah Winfrey and Barbara Walters and has appeared in a Saturday Night Live skit together with the Queen of Pop herself, Madonna. She has sold eight million albums and 35 million singles worldwide. Her outfits and performances proved to be the highlights of the evening at shows like the American Music Awards and MTV Music Awards. Thus, it comes as little surprise that not only has she been dubbed "the 21st century Madonna" (Moran 2010), but also "the future of pop" (Collins 2008).

Yet, unlike other female pop stars who have dominated the charts and video channels in 2009 such as Taylor Swift or Beyoncé Knowles, Lady Gaga has been perceived as a rather polarizing figure. Called "an Illuminati puppet' (The Vigilant Citizen 2009) and "Pop's most pretentious starlet" (Weiner), there have additionally been heated discussions about her being intersexed and a 'tranny'[1] or simply "all style, no substance" (Eddy).

The hostility is not so much targeted at her work and music, which is more successful yet not completely different from other current pop and dance tracks. Rather, the media coverage and countless Web 2.0 discussions point to unease with her star persona and the way her pop artist identity is constructed. One reason for this polarizing effect, I want to argue, is her strategic use of camp—a decidedly queer and countercultural strategy which can be understood as being both constitutive of her appeal to some and as being the basis for her rejection by others. By opening up a queer reading of Lady Gaga, camp adds to her "purportedly transgressive persona," as columnist Chuck Eddy has called it, which "relentlessly dares you to despise her, and it's no surprise so many have taken the bait."

To clarify this argument, I would like to firstly elaborate on the theory and functions of camp, especially as it has come to be understood in feminist and queer contexts. Taking my cue from scholars such as Pamela Robertson, Jack Babuscio and Judith Butler, I want to present camp as a distinct mode of mass media communication that is both capable of creating ironic distance and emotional attachment. Based on these observations, an analysis of Lady Gaga's uses of camp in her music, outfits and performances will follow—shedding some light on those aspects of camp that audiences might find intimidating, as well as on the ends to which artists might make use of camp in popular culture.

2. Camp in Context

As most scholars who have worked on camp have noted, camp is "hard to define" and "notoriously evasive" (Medhurst 276). Part of this evasiveness can be explained by the fact that camp is at the same time firmly rooted in its historically specific origins in the gay subculture as it is fully dependant on its contemporary context of—at least in this case—popular culture. Thus, if one wants to do justice to the complexity and specifics of camp, one has to bear in mind camp's original status as "a means of communication and survival [for gay people]" (Bronski 42), especially before the Stonewall riots and the advent of the gay rights movement in the late 1960s. Especially among drag queens, Medhurst stresses, camp served to "undermine the heterosexual normativity through enacting outrageous inversions of aesthetic and gender codes […]" (Medhurst 279). Defined by wit, by an awareness of the performativity of the everyday life or 'the natural' and by an estimation of the aesthetically appealing over the morally right, camp offered a mode for rejecting middle-class values.

Yet the 60s saw a shift in the perception of camp when more and more gays turned its back on it, rejecting camp and its effeminate gestures, allusions to Hollywood divas and over-the-top performances of gendered identities as a sign of internalized self-hatred, as reactionary and ultimately hurtful to the new political demands of the US gay movement. At the same time, however, camp found its way into popular culture and academic discussions about new aesthetics. The integral contribution to camp's re-evaluation was Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp," published in 1964. In accordance with the zeitgeist of the 60s, Sontag described camp as a sensibility which "facilitated the unsettling of hierarchies, [and] advocated an arch scepticism towards established cultural canons" (Medhurst 279). Sontag claimed that camp is by definition "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (277)—a statement which is coherent with her own observations on camp, yet completely ignorant of camp's roots in minority culture. This omission later earned her harsh critique from queer scholars, who rediscovered camp as a politically useful strategy for criticizing oppression and for pointing to the hypocrisy of American society in the 1980s, when "AIDS and poststructuralist theory [made] camp intellectually and politically respectable again" (Bergman 9).

It is in the light of cultural and gender studies influenced by poststructuralist theory that camp can today be formulated as a subversive strategy in popular culture, rather than just a taste for, as Sontag has put it, all things "good, because [they're] awful" (292). Quite the contrary, camp has emerged as a parodic device, defined by the four basic features "irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor" (Babuscio 20) and capable of questioning a given pretext's status as 'original' or 'natural'. Understood in this tradition of thought, camp is capable of opening mainstream cultural production for queer readings as in the case of Lady Gaga, whose "highlighted artifice of pop performativity itself [thus] becomes a queer act […]" (Cho 2009). Understanding how camp achieves this subversive potential first of all requires a clarification of the aforementioned basic, yet difficult terms *parody* and *irony*.

2.1 Aspects of Camp: Irony and Parody

In thinking about the politics of irony, literary theorist Linda Hutcheon asks the following guiding question:

> Why should anyone want to use this strange mode of discourse where you say something you don't actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually mean but also your attitude toward it? (*Theory and Politics of Irony* 2)

The answer, for Hutcheon, lies in the interaction between what has objectively been 'said' and the 'unsaid,' which is the implied meaning of this utterance. Were the ironic meaning simply this 'unsaid,' irony would be but a mere trope, a play with words. But irony, Hutcheon, contests is more than that:

> It happens in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. […] The said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter; and each has meaning in relation to the other because they literally 'interact' […] to create the real 'ironic' meaning. (*Theory and Politics of Irony* 12; emphasis in the original)

It is in this interaction that irony, and with it camp, develops its defining "cutting edge" (*Theory and Politics of Irony* 35), which differentiates it from mere ambiguity. Hutcheon's explanation additionally underscores the importance of the interpreter. Whatever the speaker's or producer's intention, ironic meaning can only develop where there is an interpreter willing and able to relate the 'said' and 'unsaid' to each other and deduce the 'ironic meaning.' Furthermore, to make an ironic utterance legible as such, there need to be so called "markers" that serve the "'meta-ironic' function" (*Theory and Politics of Irony* 96) of alerting the audience to the irony ahead. Successful ironic communication is consequently only possible if producer and audience can agree on such markers, as for example exaggeration and theatricality in the case of camp. If they do, they are part of the same 'discursive community,' which is "constituted by shared concepts of norms of communication" (Hutcheon, *Theory and Politics of Irony* 99). The idea of the 'discursive community' also explains instances where utterances are read as ironic even though they were not meant to be, or where the irony is lost on its intended audience. This may happen if the ironic markers are not mutually understood as such, i.e. when utterance and context are perceived as being incongruous, even though in the eyes of the speaker they were not. Adding to the complexity of ironic communication, Hutcheon explains:

> Irony 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—and doing so with some *evaluative edge*. (*Theory and Politics of Irony* 89; emphasis mine)

This last point makes Hutcheon's theory of irony especially illuminating for her earlier work on parody, which as I have mentioned before serves as the basic structure of camp. Hutcheon understands irony to be "structured as a miniature (semantic) version of parody's (textual) doubling" (*Theory and Politics of Irony* 4). Parody in general and postmodern forms of parody in particular can be defined as "extended repetition with critical difference" (Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody* 7). Her emphasis on the "critical difference" more than on the repetitive aspects of parody marks a decisive difference from the descriptions by other contemporary theorists, such as Fredric Jameson, who believe that postmodern parody has degenerated into "pastiche," that is, "blank parody" (Jameson 16), and has thus become meaningless. Contrary to these pessimistic assumptions, Hutcheon claims "parody [to be] a form of repetition with *ironic critical distance*" (*Theory of Parody* xii; emphasis mine). Through the use of this 'ironic distance,' which always carries a distinct attitude towards, and evaluation of what is 'said,' respectively the quoted pretext, "parody is transformative in its relationship to other texts, [whereas] pastiche is imitative" (Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody* 38).

2.2 Feminist Camp and Gender Parody

The potential transformation as opposed to simplistic imitation of norms, behavior, roles and values makes parody interesting for gender and queer studies. Judith Butler for example sees gender parody as a powerful tool in the deconstruction of gender norms and normality. In its original context gender parody is mainly connected to practices of drag and described as "subversive repetition" (Butler 146) in which "genders can […] be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*" (Butler 141, emphasis in the original)). The point, however, is not so much to make certain forms of femininity or masculinity incredible, but a much broader one, namely that "the parody is *of* the very notion of an original" (138; emphasis in the original).

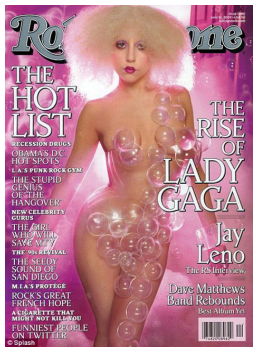
Recently, scholars have taken Butler's notion of gender parody and applied it to other forms of repetitive gender performances. Among them is Pamela Robertson, who coined the term 'feminist camp.' In her book *Guilty Pleasures—Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* Robertson makes the argument that camp—despite its roots in predominately gay male subculture—is not a strategy available solely to gay men, where women merely function as the object of camp. She argues instead that women can "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" (Robertson 6).[2] 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). Robertson borrows these terms from Mary Ann Doane and combines them with Butler's notion of the critical potential of drag, only in the case of feminist camp it is a female-female instead of a cross-gender drag performance. The effect can be summed up by Juliet Flower MacCannel's observation that "to put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off" (28).

Mae West, a successful Hollywood actress with a background in burlesque, who also produced her own films chock-full of sexual innuendo and Wilde-like witty responses in the 1930s, serves as one of Robertson's examples. West's gender performance is described as

> reappropriat[ing] the live-entertainment traditions of burlesque and female impersonation to create an ironic distance from the gender stereotypes supported by these traditions, thus putting into question contemporary stereotypes" (Robertson 27).

Arguably, the same can be said for Lady Gaga, for whom Mae West additionally presents an interesting visual intertext[3]:

"Mae West"[4]



"David LaChapelle"[5]

Like Hutcheon in her description of the "discursive community" which is needed for irony "to happen," Robertson also stresses the importance of the reading activity by the audience. Robertson's formulation of feminist camp is based on the conviction that

through a double mimesis, which equals a female-female-drag, gender conventions are denaturalized, deconstructed, and thus also critiqued. This requires an audience that understands the presented pictures as parodies, gets the references and acknowledges the markers that "create an ironic distance"—the core for (feminist) camp's liberating and subversive effect.

Consequently, there is almost by definition always a part of the audience that is not 'in on the joke.' Yet outside the discursive community of (feminist) camp and queer articulations, what is left is often but a mere replication of the same old pop stereotypes all over again, albeit in a weird and superficial version. It is this dependence on pretexts, especially the reliance on partially reactionary or even misogynistic/homophobic images, which has made the strategy so controversial. Camp, like many other forms of parody, is often accused of perpetuating stereotypes at the same time it is trying to subvert them. Yet, instead of viewing this dependence on hegemonic texts as a weakness of camp, I want to suggest that this is actually its strongest feature. By incorporating them, camp performances serve as constant reminders of how powerful and ubiquitous dominant discourses and texts are, while simultaneously pointing out their gaps and incongruities, thereby undermining their claim to totality and truth. A similar claim has been made by Linda Hutcheon concerning "irony's intimacy with the dominant discourse it contests":

> [The intimacy] is its strength, for it allows ironic discourse both to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to, even if not understood) and also to 'relativize the [dominant's] authority and stability' […], in part by appropriating its power […]. (*Theory and Politics of Irony* 30)

3. (C)Andy Warhol, Lady(?) Gaga

Lady Gaga has bought a lot of mainstream media time during the early stages of her career, and her intimacy with the media and marketing methods is well-documented. The question remains to what extent her performances are able to take advantage of this position as a well-known pop icon to relativize dominant discourses.

Even though an artist's intentions are not the defining feature of any evaluation or analysis of artistic products, it is nevertheless interesting in this context to note the awareness for the above-mentioned subversive potential in some of Lady Gaga's interviews: "I almost want to trick people into hanging with something that is really cool with a pop song. It's almost like the spoonful of sugar and I'm the medicine" (Lady Gaga: Official Site). Declaring herself the medicine, sugar-coated in perfectly produced pop songs, is as camp as a metaphor for the appropriation of power and consequent infusion of subcultural ideas into mainstream discourse can get. Equally camp-focused are her frequent allusions to Andy Warhol and his transsexual muse Candy Darling, her admiration of the great androgynous pop icons Grace Jones and David Bowie, as well as her dedication to the opera-infused rock style of gay legend Freddie Mercury. While these references are interesting in themselves, they also provide an incongruous background against which to read the initially rather tame, pop-compatible appearance of Lady Gaga:

In his reading of Lady Gaga, Alexander Cho, for example, draws the following connection:

> While it may be simple to dismiss her outright as a bit of normative pop fluff, this, I argue, misses the point. In fact, Lady Gaga makes a very explicit attempt to shrewdly, purposefully—even politically—expose the nature of our fascination with pop icons by making it her mission to foreground the artifice of her own performance. (Cho 2009)

As Cho implies, Gaga does not stop at name-dropping her inspirational sources, but instead models her whole public persona more and more on these camp icons. Her "Haus of Gaga"[6] for example is equally reminiscent of both Andy Warhol's "Factory" and the houses in the vogueing[7] scene. Even though these two worked at very different cultural levels, their ultimate aim was the same: the literal production of stars and fame—even if just for one night or the proverbial 15 minutes. Via the "Haus" and by being both its prime product and initiator, Lady Gaga is commenting on the artificiality of the pop industry, while at the same time aligning herself with two decisively gay, extremely artistic subcultural traditions.

Besides their complex relation to mainstream culture, both the factory and vogueing share the conviction of the performativity of life and gender in particular. For example, Warhol's muse, Candy Darling, was a transsexual actress who now has been incorporated into the short films which "The Haus" produced to structure Lady Gaga's concerts during her "The

Fame Ball" tour. Lady Gaga stars in the three-part mini-series entitled "Who shot Candy Warhol?"[8] as her alter ego Candy Warhol musing over the power of pop. Merging transsexual actress and gay director into a hyperfeminine figure[9], Lady Gaga is not only blurring gender lines but also questioning the status of her own work. Candy Warhol describes pop as "a beautiful monster" that ate her brain and heart, while another version of Lady Gaga is projected onto a huge screen proclaiming that pop music will never be lowbrow.

Yet what follows during her concert is, at least according to general artistic standards, low brow at best. As mentioned before, Lady Gaga's music is certainly well-written and well-produced but still pretty much standard fare. Adding several costume changes, elaborate lighting and scantily-clad background dancers adds to the entertainment but certainly not to the concert's high-brow compatibility which is implied in Lady Gaga's bold statement. More importantly, however, it adds to the camp effect of her and similar other pop music performances by "denaturalizing them through irony and excess" (Doty 88). Excess is not only provided by outrageous costumes, stage design and choreography. Rather, Lady Gaga has also made it her trademark to contrast her electro-dance numbers with extensive piano interludes and a capella versions of some of her songs. Yet, instead of choosing some of her rare, seemingly more befitting ballads for these intensively dramatic and theatrical parts of her shows, Lady Gaga re-invents her disco-anthems—including lyrics like "I wanna take a ride on your disco stick" or "Loving you is cherry pie"—as spectacularly serious moments of acoustic musical performance.

https://youtu.be/bIEHg5Af_XE

The by now infamous 'bubble costume' she is wearing in this clip marks an important transition in the public persona of Lady Gaga, as her clothes and accessories tend to become more elaborate and extravagant with every public appearance.[10] Thus, just like feminist camp pioneer Mae West, Lady Gaga increasingly performs an outrageous femininity. And just like West, Gaga manages to be parodic subject and sexy object at the same time, further unsettling ideas about presumed naturalness of gender and desire.

"With a stiletto planted in both mainstream and marginal territories, Lady Gaga unabashedly invokes both the monstrous and the marvelous while using camp to critique the nature of her enterprise" writes Jen Hutton (Hutton 2009). Her version of femininity is modeled after female impersonators, her talk about desire is based on inverted clichés about sexuality. She is constantly highlighting the performativity of her own feminine act by exaggerating body parts that traditionally make up female attractiveness—like hair—while hiding others, for example her face behind masks and huge glasses.

While other pop stars like Madonna or Christina Aguilera went through a limited number of different fashion phases in their career and dress accordingly, Lady Gaga changes her style almost daily from baroque ballet to futuristic domina and back into 80s disco queen. This constant change of costume adds to the female-female drag effect that "[…] undermine[s] the heterosexual normativity through enacting outrageous inversions of aesthetic and gender codes […]" (Medhurst 279). While making other pop stars look pale in comparison, she is at the same time commenting on their performativity and product-like status. As a camp performer, Lady Gaga is as much part of the discourse as she is the dissenting voice within—a cultural position as intimidating as entertaining.

4. Artificial Authenticity

Since irony expresses neither solely the said nor the implied unsaid but rather the combination and interaction of the two, camp also is not so much about the opposite of

what is said and done but about what the surface statement has to say about what is hinted at and vice versa. This way the substance is no longer hidden beneath the surface, but the surface 'becomes' the substance.[11] As my reading of Lady Gaga has shown, this disillusion about questions of authenticity of all kinds is what makes her performance queer. Her use of camp "[…] operates as an aggressive metamorphosizing operation, attacking norms of behavior, appearance, and art to revel in their inherent artifice" (Klinger 135).

Artificiality, at last, brings us full circle to the initial moment, when camp was no longer solely rooted in gay subculture, but got introduced into academia and pop discourse. In "Notes on Camp," quotes by Oscar Wilde, so to speak the original camp, are interspersed into the text, which is also dedicated to the great poet and aesthete, who once commanded "one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art" (Sontag 277). If nothing else, Lady Gaga has managed to do both, and having accomplished this Wildean state of being, she set her next goal in an equally camp manner as "trying to change the world one sequin at a time" (Lady Gaga: Official Site). With reference to the opening statement by Henry Jenkins and with Lady Gaga's dedication of her Grammy Award to "God and the Gays" in mind, this sounds like a new message, indeed.

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1 Fellow pop star Christina Aguilera even told the *Los Angeles Times*: "You know, that's funny that you mention that. This person [Lady Gaga] was just brought to my attention not too long ago. I'm not quite sure who this person is, to be honest. I don't know if it is a man or a woman. I just wasn't sure" (Amter).

2 Even though Robertson's work is the most extensive discussion of the topic, she is by far not the only one attesting to camp's usefulness for women. Other scholars who reject camp's sole attribution to gay men are Jack Babuscio, Andrea Weiss, David Bergman or Joanne Morreale.

3 Lady Gaga also starred in burlesque shows in downtown New York, elements of which were later incorporated into her 2007 performances with Lady Starlight.

4 Picture reproduced by courtesy of Jerry Murbach, www.doctormacro.com

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6 An additional house-reference is acknowledged in Gaga's video of her first single from *The Fame Monster*, "Bad Romance." The story of the music video is set in the "Bathhouse of Gaga," a name alluding to the tradition of gay bath houses. Another female camp icon, Bette Midler, mentions these bath houses as the starting point for her career. Furthermore, Lady Gaga cites her fascination with Bauhaus art as the reason for the spelling of the "Haus of Gaga" (Zeit.de).

7 For more information on this dance style, see Brown. For an introduction into the social sphere surrounding vogue, the documentary *Paris is Burning* is recommended.

8 The feature film depicting the life of Valerie Solanas, who shot Andy Warhol, because "he had too much control over [her] life" (Harron), is called *I Shot Andy Warhol*.

9 Lady Gaga explains the short films, called Crevette, as follows: "'Crevette' means 'shrimp' in French. I named them that because—it might be quite silly of me—but shrimp are small and decadent and tasty. Which is what I intend for my little 57-seconds films to be. And in these particular films, which I show throughout the performance… it's called "Who Shot Candy Warhol?" And the first film is called 'Pop Ate My Heart.' And the second film is called 'Pop Ate My Brain.' And the third is called 'Pop Ate My Face'" (Gagapedia).

10 Lady Gaga herself emphasizes that there is no other appearance: "I wouldn't like people to see me—me—in any other way than my music and my stage performances" (Cho).

11 In writing about films by Josef von Sternberg, creator of the Marlene Dietrich myth, Jack Babuscio comes to a similar conclusion: "[…] to find camp in Sternberg is not to surrender to the joys of "over-decorated 'aesthetic' nothings. […] [but rather] to perceive

the deep significance of appearances—a sumptuous surface that serves not as an empty and meaningless background, but as the very subject […]" (31).

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