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Camp: What's Spain Got to Do With It?

PATRICK PAUL GARLINGER & H. ROSI SONG

Camp is an elusive term, its usage abundant but imprecise, its meaning capacious but slippery. “An impossible object of discourse” (qtd. in Cleto 3), camp is often associated with theatricality, homosexuality, drag, pop culture, and poor taste. With its conceptual fluidity it moves between various, often interrelated fields of critical interest: capitalism, counterculture, and commodification; aesthetics, taste, and class; gender, sexuality, and identity politics; melodrama, kitsch, and literary style. Its expansive character also continually evokes ontological questions: it is an isolatable characteristic or merely in the eyes of the beholder? Even less clear is whether camp is as political or apolitical, subversive or normative, serious or frivolous. We might say that camp, to borrow Luis Cernuda’s famous verse, “es una pregunta cuya respuesta no existe.” Still, camp’s critical mobility is also its allure, for it provides a powerful lens for analyzing the material, ideological, and political conditions of production and consumption for a myriad array of cultural phenomena. Hence, it bears asking what value, if any, does “camp” as a category have for critics of Spain’s literature and culture?

This is not an insignificant question, for in spite of its evanescent nature, camp is less than mobile, more fixed than fluid, in one key respect: as an object of critical analysis, camp remains heavily tied to Anglo-American culture. The critics most often cited (Susan Sontag, Andrew Ross, Judith Butler, to name a few) are generally based in the United States and publish in English. The term *camp* is itself difficult to translate from English, although there are expressions associated with camp such as the French *se camper* or *la pluma* in Spain. A cursory

glance at key critical works on camp, such as David Bergman's influential anthology *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (1993) and Fabio Cleto's collection of previously published essays, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (1999), reveals that Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank, Andy Warhol, and Christopher Isherwood are consistently evoked as primary objects of analysis, with Roland Barthes and Marcel Proust as exceptions that prove the rule. It was not until the late 1990s that full-length studies of camp in Spain and Latin America such as Alejandro Varderi's *Severo Sarduy y Pedro Almodóvar: del barroco al kitsch en la narrativa y el cine postmodernos* (1996), Alejandro Yarza's *Un caníbal en Madrid: la sensibilidad camp y el reciclaje de la historia en el cine de Pedro Almodóvar* (1999), and José Amícola's *Camp y posvanguardia* (2000) began to emerge.

Camp's mobility, beyond Anglo-American borders, also finds its limits, its theoretical flow charting other, now familiar paths. The aforementioned titles themselves underscore the impression that the topic of camp is tightly tethered to the name of Pedro Almodóvar, virtually the only Spanish artist included in critical works that consider camp in an international framework. This emphasis is, to be sure, a reflection of camp's historical development, for in the aftermath of the Franco dictatorship that ended in 1975, artists associated with *la movida madrileña*, and Almodóvar chief among them, embraced camp as a mode of artistic and (a)political expression. Yet it would be inaccurate to assume that the filmmaker from La Mancha has a monopoly on camp. Writers such as Lluís Fernández (*L'anarquista nu* and *Una prudente distancia*), Eduardo Mendicutti (*Una mala noche la tiene cualquiera* and *Yo no tengo la culpa de haber nacido tan sexy*), and Terenci Moix (*Garras de astracán*, *Mujercísimas*, and *Chulas y famosas*, among others), filmmakers Félix Sabroso and Dunia Ayaso (*Perdona, bonita, pero Lucas me quería a mí* and *El grito en el cielo*), and the Latin American media personality and

author Boris Izaguirre (*Morir de glamour*), who appears regularly on the popular television show *Crónicas marcianas* since his move to Spain, have produced sizable and popular bodies of work that can be categorized as camp. Nor is the critical value of camp necessarily limited to the contemporary era: nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary and cultural modalities such as *cursilería*, melodrama, *esperpento*, and popular “pulp” fiction share characteristics that are often grouped under the rubric of camp. The range of authors and texts studied in this issue is a testament to the viability of camp as a critical lens for the study of Spanish literature and culture, before and after Almodóvar.

It should be stated from the outset that the goal of these critical interventions is neither to produce an impossibly homogeneous and autochthonous definition of camp for Spain nor to provide an exhaustive list of camp artists and texts. It is also not a genealogy of camp, although the contributions are motivated in many respects by a genealogical impulse: to analyze specific manifestations of camp and related cultural phenomena, attending closely to their historical and geographic context. Each essay contributes to the history of camp by conceptualizing camp as a particular mode of aesthetic expression that is, at the same time, deeply imbricated in a political context or, at the very least, has political ramifications. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of camp in Spain, which distinguishes itself from its Anglo-American counterpart, is that it has steered a path between Sontag’s initial claim that camp was “disengaged, depoliticized--or at least apolitical” (277) and Moe Meyer’s equally forceful assertion that camp is only and always a queer political act (1, 5), adopting instead an ambivalent position somewhere in between. This oscillation between aesthetics and politics is noteworthy in the ways in which all of the essays move between high and low art categories, on the one hand, and gender and sexual politics on the other. These two modes of conceptualizing camp are, to be sure, evident in much Anglo-

American criticism, yet they take on a particularly heightened interconnection in the Spanish context that is owed in large part to the historical moment in which the word “camp” entered Spain.

Susan Sontag’s essay first appeared in a 1966 Castilian translation in *Revista de Occidente*, and in 1969 the Castilian edition of *Contra la interpretación* was published by Seix Barral (to date only the Castilian translation exists). Dictionary entries confirm the initial association of camp with Sontag’s aestheticism: “De época o gusto pasados de moda” (*Diccionario de español actual* 829); “Se aplica al estilo, manifestación artística, etc., propios de una época pasada, especialmente de los años treinta y cuarenta” (Moliner 483); “Tendència estètica del darrer terç del sXX que preconiza el retorn nostàlgic a formes plàstiques, musicals i literàries dels nostres avant passats, considerades passades de moda” (*Diccionaris 62 de la llengua catalana* 188). (Perhaps owed to its imported or subcultural status, *camp* does not appear in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española.) The use of the term in journalism also confirms that the aesthetic understanding of “camp” as a trend that recovers past tastes quickly came to dominate in the 1970s. An article in *Tele/eXpres* entitled “Vuelve ‘Lord Camp’ Lorenzo González” reads: “Lorenzo González, auténtico señor de la canción melódica, durante tantos años de millares de ‘fans’, auténtico ‘camp’ resucitado para el deleite del oído, reaparecerá muy pronto en nuestra ciudad” (24). Furthermore, the more specific association of camp with pop culture, and pop music in particular, was in evidence, as the title of another article from *Tele/eXpres*, “Música ‘pop’ en sitio ‘camp,’” suggests (27).

The aesthetic function of camp nevertheless takes on political overtones rather quickly. J. M. Castellet’s 1970 anthology *Nueve novísimos poetas españoles* reiterates the link between “camp” and “pop culture,” as both terms are used to describe a new generation that emerges in

the late '60s and breaks with the prior one, which was traumatized by the experience of the Civil War and motivated by political commitment. Influenced instead by “unos *mass media* de muy baja calidad” (20), the new generation espouses a sensibility closely aligned with camp. Initially Castellet offers a positive appraisal of camp for among the benefits that a camp sensibility affords, he argues, is the refusal of evaluations of culture based on standards of quality and taste (29), and he furthermore claims that the widespread adoption of camp among this new generation is quite simply “un derecho inalienable: el de vivir en libertad y sentimentalmente las contradicciones de su tiempo histórico” (29). (Castellet also partakes of the sensibility when he thanks Mae West--an example that highlights the association of camp with American culture--for her music, which accompanied him during the book's redaction [7]).

Yet this freedom is not without its potential pitfalls, and Castellet quickly responds to the specter of complicity that ostensibly casts its shadow over camp. More specifically, he argues that the mass media engages in the creation of myths, and that myth, following Roland Barthes, is an effective tool for the “paralización de la imaginación creadora de los individuos y las colectividades y esto es utilizado siempre por los detentadores del poder” (26-27). He thus asks by way of conclusion if the camp sensibility adopted by this generation remains complicitous with the mythic function of mass culture which has served to erase history and to close down signification: “¿es totalmente cierto que el mito o las mitologías de nuestros días son un mensaje despolitizado y alienador?” (45-46). Castellet's answer is that a camp sensibility can function to “demythify” even as it participates in the mass culture which has served to ward off overt politicization (46). Confronted with the oppressive cultural milieu of the Franco regime, this new generation of poets found a way to reappropriate mass media for a different end, and in so doing,

helped to expose the ideological pretensions of the regime without adopting a direct political stance.

Camp in Spain was not solely related to mass culture, pop music, and poetry. Camp aesthetics were also closely linked to homosexuality--and gay writers in particular--early on in discourses on the topic, even if such associations are not in evidence in codified definitions. The word appears closely linked with queerness in Terenci Moix's short story from his collection *La torre dels vices capitals* (1965): "Lilí Barcelona. Tempteig de melodrama 'camp' i àd-huc 'kinky'. Sense defugir, ben entès, 'that charming queer touch'" (89). Yet one of the most significant and extensive discussions of camp is an interview with the poet Jaime Gil de Biedma in an early work of on gay liberation, *El homosexual ante la sociedad enferma* (1978): Gil de Biedma identifies the Generación del 27 with a homosexual sensibility--even as he recognizes that many members of that generation were not gay--that he denominates as *camp*. In his analysis, he argues that it is less the author's sexuality than his camp sensibility that which ultimately leaves its mark on poetry: Alberti was very camp, as were Salinas and Lorca, Cernuda less so due to the moral influence of his reading of Gide. This camp sensibility that emerges in their poetry is one in which sentiment is a "estilización irónica" and "una exhibición, un numerito, lo mismo cuando se le entiende como un modo de realización estética que cuando se queda en pluma pura y simple" (201).

The association of camp with *la pluma* reiterates the fundamental link between homosexuality and camp that runs throughout Gil de Biedma's discourse. The interview's context is the early years of the transition to democracy and the political formation of gay and lesbian liberation groups--not to mention the more immediate context of being published in a volume on gay liberation--and this political context, is present implicitly in Gil de Biedma's

discussion of the homosexual ghetto and the function of camp as a defense against homophobia in terms that echo explanations of camp's pre-Stonewall function. Indeed, when pressed for a definition of camp, Gil de Biedma answers, "*camp* significaba y significa exactamente lo mismo que *pluma* en la jerga española" (196). He goes on to argue that *la pluma* is a deliberate impersonation and caricature of the heterosexual image of what a gay man is, and in this respect, is a ritualized mode of complicity with and revenge against that image. For Gil de Biedma, "sacar la pluma" is a serious, self-conscious act with ethical dimensions (202). Viewed together, Castellet's introductory comments and Gil de Biedma's interview reveal that camp was from the outset an aesthetic discourse closely bound up with questions of politics--as a reaction to the paralyzing force of the mass media promulgated by the Franco regime (Castellet), and as a defense against the prevailing homophobia and as evidence of an early manifestation of a homosexual identity (Gil de Biedma).

Moving between aesthetics and politics, between past and present, the issue begins by juxtaposing camp's treatment of bad taste as good taste with that particular modality of taste and class known in Spain as *cursilería*. As Noël Valis has shown, *cursilería* is a nineteenth-century term that reflects a middle-class desire for social ascension that is frustrated by a lack of means, and hence perceived as a fall into bad taste; to attribute or designate an object or person as *cursi* is a pejorative speech act. In her essay, "La forma es fondo," Elizabeth Amann takes up the relation between *cursilería* and camp in Clarín's *La Regenta* (1884) with a close reading of Ana Ozores's performance in a Nazarene procession in Chapter 26. Amann's subtle argument shows that Ana attempts to self-consciously adopt *cursilería* in the form of a public spectacle of solidarity--in other words, to "camp it up"--and yet she fails to do so, her awareness of her descent into bad taste overwhelming the political and class consequences of her act. Amann's

reading demonstrates the critical value of camp, in conjunction with *cursilería*, as a means of understanding the concerns with vulgarity, taste, and class in Clarín's work.

Alberto Mira's contribution, "After Wilde: Camp Discourse in Hoyos and Retana," similarly engages in a form of canon revision by recuperating the camp aesthetics of a generation of writers that have been relatively forgotten in literary histories of the period. Between the Generation of 1898 and *modernismo*, on the one hand, and the avant-gardes of the 1920s, on the other, there emerged a "popular" Spanish literature. Taking Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent and Àlvaro de Retana as his two case studies, Mira demonstrates the function of a camp aesthetic sensibility through the literary styles and narrative content of their respective works. Mira argues convincingly for the aesthetic modality that will later be dubbed camp (applying the term as Gil de Biedma does to the Generación del 27), as the early articulation of an incipient gay culture prior to the formation of organized gay politics. In so doing, Mira's essay not only contributes to understanding the presence of camp as a literary style but to the history of Spanish camp as part of a gay cultural modality.

At the close of his essay, Mira hints at the ways in which the aesthetics of Hoyos and Retana will resurface in the works of Almodóvar and other gay writers in the 1980s. The deliberate use of camp as a "politics of frivolity"--i.e., as an apolitical stance vis-à-vis official political organization--during the early years of the transition to democracy is by now a well-known story. Alejandro Yarza has convincingly shown how in the 1980s Spanish artists such as Almodóvar, Ocaña, Costus, Ceesepe, El Hortelano, Pérez Villalta, and Ouka Lele adopted a camp sensibility in order to parody the iconography inherited from the Franco regime (17). Nevertheless, the very kitsch culture produced by the regime reappropriated by those artists has been given considerably less attention. Continuing his earlier work, Yarza returns to the Franco

period in his essay, “The Petrified Tears of General Franco,” to explore the production of what he calls a “fascist kitsch aesthetics.” José Luis Sáenz de Heredia’s film *Raza* (1941), based on a script written by Franco, was designed to serve as the basis for a Francoist aesthetics. Yarza argues that the fascist regime appropriated high art modes of cinematographic representation in order to create a mythic realm of fixed signification whose purpose was to consolidate the regime’s affective control over its viewing subjects. Yarza’s close analysis of the film reveals the techniques used by the regime to close down interpretation and to present a single, monolithic meaning for the spectator.

Noël Valis’s essay performs a similar interpretive function by addressing the historical roots of camp in Spain. Whereas Yarza returns to the Francoist cultural machinery, Valis engages in subtle analysis of Ana Rossetti’s *Plumas de España* (1988) to argue that the use of camp in the 1980s is a recycling of the *cursilería* of the past. Francisco Umbral memorably defined postmodernism as the moment when someone looked at the image of Franco and said “Qué viejecito tan camp” (38). Franco may now seem camp, but Valis shows that the campiness of Francoist culture lies in its *cursilería*. She demonstrates how Rossetti, through the figure of the *travestí*, camps up the cultural remnants of Francoism. Criticizing Debord’s view on spectacle as ahistorical, Valis also demonstrates that camping up Francoism is not only a question of subversion but that there is a sentimental value to its preservation. The *travestí* thus functions as a metaphorical figure of the transition to democracy, where the past is brought into the present through the filter of camp.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that camp is deployed solely as a critique of Francoist culture. Josep-Anton Fernández’s reading of *Ocaña, retrat intermitent* (1978) brings into discussion a crucial correction to the critical reception of Ventura Pons’s work, which, he

argues, has suppressed the film's Catalan context. Fernàndez shows how Pons reinscribes Catalan culture into the film by using camp's denaturalizing effect in its appropriation and use of Andalusian popular culture. Critics have often focused on the subversive dimension of Ocaña's camp performance, but Fernàndez's close reading of Ocaña's self-proclaimed authenticity and nostalgic look toward all things Andalusian reveals camp's more conservative tendencies. In turn, Fernàndez analyzes how Pons makes camp bring to light the marginalization of Catalan culture through a careful staging of parodical performances. Engaging in a close reading of the framing and editing of Pons's work, Fernàndez discusses the misrecognition of *Ocaña* at the expense of its Catalan dimension: camp depends on a reader with a certain knowledge, and its only the spectator who can recognize the presence of Catalan culture in the film is aware of Pons's camp strategy to expose Catalan culture's marginalized status. In other words, while camp may not be entirely successful (Ocaña's version upholding a certain status quo, Pons's version going unread), the spectator who does successfully read Pons's camp strategy is made further aware of Catalonia's marginalization.

If Catalan camp goes unread, the commercial success of camp in Spain remains indelibly tied to Castilian language and culture. Terenci Moix's transition from Catalan to Castilian in his literary works, his embrace of a canonical genre, and his subsequent success in the Spanish literary market is the focus of H. Rosi Song's essay, "From *Enfant Terrible* to Prodigal Son." She takes her cue from Andrew Ross's view that the "reorganization of the capitalist bases of the culture industries [...] necessarily changed the aesthetic face of categories of taste" (310), in order to analyze the recently deceased Moix's camp aesthetics, especially in *Chulas y famosas* (1999). Song focuses on the crossover or the establishment of a kinship between Moix's campy work and Valle-Inclán's *esperpento*, analyzing this movement in the intersection between camp

sensibility and the production of culture in a consumerist society, and in so doing, she raises political questions about Moix's use of camp as a commercialized aesthetic enterprise. Her essay seeks to understand the ways in which Moix self-consciously negotiated and exploited in his own writing his status as a gay and "marketable" writer of best-selling products within the current *cultura mediática* of Spain.

If Moix embraced camp as commercially viable aesthetic mode, even as he playfully distances himself from it in *Chulas y famosas*, Almodóvar seems to have turned away from it altogether. Reviewers of *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) remarked that Almodóvar had eschewed his camp aesthetic for a more sentimental melodramatic form. In "All About Agrado," Garlinger argues that critics have not paid sufficient attention to the intertextuality the film establishes with Joseph L. Mankiewicz's camp romp *All About Eve* (1950). Through a close analysis of the figure of Agrado and her monologue, Garlinger reads Almodóvar's use of *All About Eve* and its representation of sexuality as a return to melodrama that succeeds in peeling back the parodic dimension of camp to reveal an underlying sincerity in the relationship between camp spectator and spectacle: Agrado's claim to authenticity, although a camp performance, is also a sincere one that invites an affectionate connection with the audience rather than a distant, ironic one usually associated with camp. Garlinger argues that Almodóvar's *Todo sobre mi madre* is not so much a rejection of a frivolous, camp sensibility but rather a commentary on the function and meaning of camp as an authentic mode of feeling for certain sectors of queer culture.

Collectively, these essays demonstrate that camp in Spain is not a monolithic entity tied to one artist, one medium or one language. As a function that exposes the political implications of artistic and commercial practices, camp offers critics a potent way of looking at such diverse topics as canon formation, capitalism and commodification, the connection between camp and

gay culture, and the use of camp to negotiate with the dominance of national culture or high culture. Yet by no means are these essays the final word on the subject. A recent exhibition entitled “Cultura porqueria. Una espeleología del gust” at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (May 20-August 31, 2003), for example, included a sample of Spain’s current cultural offerings. In a section entitled “*Living* la vida basura. El pabellón de España” there was an ample collection of talk and reality television shows, magazines and newspapers, photographs, video clips, personal web pages and websites gathered, it seemed, as an indictment of current Spanish mainstream culture. Described as “subproductos” of a “sub-cultura,” the criticism of this sampling reflected past feelings of inadequacy when comparing Spain to other European or developed countries, reminding the public (once again) of the need to confront the nation’s seemingly intractable *atraso* “para descubrir que estamos a medio camino, en lo estético, entre el *papichulismo* y el esperpento de siempre. Y en lo ideológico, entre el simulacro, el sucedáneo, el galimatías, el quiero y no puedo... y lo pseudo todo” (“*Living*” 177).

Significantly, the criticism of trash culture finds an antecedent in camp. Connecting “camp” and “trash,” the curator of this exhibition, Jordi Costa, describes them as “vasos comunicantes” that work as “formulaciones dispares de una misma reacción contra la impermeabilidad jerárquica de la alta cultura, expresiones lúdicas de un malestar cultural de médula nada frívola” (145). While the symptoms of this cultural malaise were illustrated by the multiplication of what is called “telebasura”--talk and reality shows such as *Operación Triunfo*, *Gran Hermano*, and most recently, the infamous *Hotel Glam*--, the explanation of its causes seems to require new critical perspectives. It was the history of camp and its many critical lives that offered Costa an alternative to contextualize this cultural phenomenon. His keen observation about trash culture reaffirms the mutual imbrication of aesthetics and politics that characterizes

the history of camp in Spain: “la cultura basura no tiene sexo, pero, al contrario de lo que sostiene Sontag al hablar de *camp*, sí posee ideología: o, al mejor dicho, se transforma en ideología cuando la dialéctica entre buen gusto y mal gusto se convierte no ya en metonimia, sino en sucesora evolutiva de los pulsos políticos” (145). From *cursilería* to kitsch, from pulp fiction to melodrama, from mass media to *telebasura*, the on-going debates about the value and meaning of contemporary culture indicate that camp, in spite of its importation over three decades ago, still has a significant role in measuring and adjudicating cultural value and aesthetic taste in Spain.

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