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## The Wide Camp Sea, or Notes on Sontag

Sholem Krishtalka

### 1. The Artist as a Young Man, parts 1 and 2.

When I was fifteen, I had a summer job as a counselor at a day camp. I had a disabled child in my bunk who required a constant monitor, in camp-disability parlance, a Shadow. This man, this Shadow, was a student of child psychology, who harbored secret literary aspirations. In retrospect, I try and construct his sexuality, but I can't – my memory cannot decipher any potential queerness. He seemed to have a pretty good grasp of mine, though. We were sitting together one morning, talking, when he turned to me and told me I was the reincarnation of Oscar Wilde.

At fifteen, I was not yet a sexual being. Or rather, I was, but only in furtive, private ways, ways buried under layers of shame and denial. So imagine the impact of this declaration on my un-sexual mind! Just as I can't decipher any retrospective queerness, I can't decipher what the Shadow might have meant by this karmic endowment; did he read my nascent queerness? Was he merely responding to my precocity, my predilection for one-liners? (They weren't aphorisms yet – I was only fifteen.) Are those two characteristics even separable?

I feel the need to spell out this metaphor for you, to pound its semiotic significance, to underscore the confluence of meaning in that statement, in that context: I was compared to Oscar Wilde at camp. Stories like this affirm my faith in metaphor as a cosmic principle.

In my second year of undergraduate studies as a Painting major, I took a class whose *raison d'être* was interdisciplinarity; Fine Arts students from every discipline were gathered together in this class, and encouraged to partake in the borderless fields of cross-disciplinary practice. I wish I could say that I took this class because I was adventurous, and had a taste for the cutting edge; no: this class was a degree requirement, and the teacher intimidated me. She was a harshly discerning video artist, and she had an air of the avant-garde about her that made my painting enterprise feel greedily atavistic.

She liked me though, despite her self-confessed (and purposeful) lack of knowledge about painting. One day, apropos nothing (perhaps I was waxing aphoristic), she told me I was “pure camp,” that I was the “definition of camp.” Aphorisms failed me, and I responded with a

paltry “oh...thanks....” I was recently, publicly gay, having come out a year or so previous. I was still getting a handle on things, still drawing the contours (to paraphrase Susan Sontag) of my gaiety; I couldn’t yet embrace the full force of my campiness.

Still, this has been a dominant motif, for me: I have a camp aura, and other people feel the need to identify it, to spontaneously declare its presence, the way one would declare the approach of an oncoming car, or an encroaching tornado.

## 2. Laws of Physics.

Just as camp under-girds my persona, it contains my project. It provides the universe for my work; it sets the physical laws, determines the essential relationships, and establishes the particular gravity that holds down my ideas. Understand: I don’t want to define camp. I’ll approach definition, as a by-product of my explications. I make no pretense to tracing limits. If anything, I want to be expansive. I might fail in my attempt at expansiveness, but that’s alright; camp has a particular generosity towards failure. Didn’t Susan Sontag declare, on camp’s behalf, that it consists in “a seriousness that fails”? (285)

## 3. (S)He Who Laughs Last.

You’ll notice that my discourse has already announced its vocabulary; my language is grandiose, my tone is solemn, if not elegiac then certainly poetic or mock-poetic, arch. My metaphors are hyperbolic, almost to the point of self-parody. This is what happens when I talk about camp: it absorbs me. Camp subsumes, it soaks me up, or, more aptly, it translates me. This is almost involuntary on my part, certainly, but nevertheless, this translation is necessary. To do otherwise is to absolve myself of camp, to claim not only indifference to it, but to claim superiority, the same way a doctor claims superiority over a dead body when he performs an autopsy.

To abstain from camp’s translations, not to take it on its own terms, is for me to betray it. It knows of my betrayal, and laughs at it; anyone writing about camp necessarily creates a work of camp. This was Sontag’s first mistake: she claimed distance, equal parts adoration of and revulsion to camp. Thus, she could talk about it objectively, critically (as if objectivity and criticism are necessary spouses); she could avoid creating a piece of camp herself. Of course, her insights have been questioned; many of her assertions have been proven problematic, in

numerous different ways, in essay after essay, in anthology after anthology. Thus, seminal as her essay is, because it attempts to “draw [camp’s] contours,” (278) it fails, but it fails spectacularly. And she also fails fantastically, passionately, naïvely; qualities she herself uses to describe a failure that can be redeemed by camp (285). Camp always has the last laugh.

#### 4. The “Is” of Camp Identification.

Much of the discourse on camp centres on a desire to define. Everyone seems to want to be the first to scale that mountain and plant that flag. Criticism on camp might diverge from Sontag’s original hypotheses, but not from her goals – drawing the contours of camp is still the object of the game. Thus, all of the discourse on camp inevitably involves the phrase “camp is.” *My* discourse involves the phrase “camp is.” I find the endless repetitions of this fragment embarrassing and clichéd; I don’t want to fall into the trap of attempting to define a concept so essentially amorphous, and, though I can’t, I feel I should resist using “camp is.”

Arthur Danto talked of the “‘is’ of artistic identification” (38). Art confronts us with a peculiar mode of being and type of representation, and so, to reconcile ourselves to this mode, to accommodate artistic iconography’s unique ontological demands, we have to redefine our identifying terminology (Danto 37-38). We have to endow the verb “is” with an object-specific meaning, a meaning that will respond to the exigencies of artistic identification and interpretation. I propose we do the same with camp; we arrive at the ‘is’ of camp identification. However, the “is” can’t be a definitive “is.” It can point to a tendency, a particularity, a behaviour, but it can’t pretend that it has immobilized its object, added it to a cumulative list resulting in a firm definition. The “is” of camp identification can only be ostensive. It identifies without pretense to fixed classification. It recognizes its subject, and simultaneously recognizes that its subject will shift and mutate at will, and will not be beholden to ossification by analysis.

There. Now I can proceed.

#### 5. Sontag, Bloody Sontag, parts 1 to 3.

All roads lead to Sontag; or perhaps more appropriately, all roads absurdly, perversely, emanate from her. She arrived at camp first (well, technically, Christopher Isherwood did, but his jottings were so lazy and slack that they shouldn’t count for as much as they do). Because of her

primacy, she has to be dealt with; I must reconcile myself to her resonance.

Sontag outlines a series of conditions for camp, and says that there are some things that cannot be the objects of camp (279). I disagree. Everything (anything?) can be camp, or camped. A Jewish friend told me the following story: he was remarking on his grandmother's exceptionally defined biceps, to which she responded, without missing a beat: "Five years in Hitler's gym." If that's not a camp gesture, I don't know what is.

Sontag talks of underclasses pinning their hopes of assimilation into the dominant culture on general proclivities towards endemic subcultural tendencies: Jews via moral seriousness, and homosexuals via "the aesthetic sense" (what she describes as the propagandistic emanation of camp discernment and taste) (291-292). She tells us that these two qualities have infiltrated American cultural life, and have become its defining forces in the twentieth century. Yes, I agree. But she talks of Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual camp as if they are mutually exclusive, irreconcilable. She has allied camp with irony, humour, theatricality, superficiality, apolitics, frivolity: and so camp becomes antithetical to moral seriousness. To be sure, camp has those elements in it (except apolitics), but I don't think these attributes necessarily divorce it from moral seriousness. What if the two don't have to be separated? What if I pursue camp with Jewish moral seriousness?

## 6. On Proper Nouns.

These aforementioned attributes of camp are routinely listed to establish definition. That tendency is precisely what makes any resultant definition false; yes, camp contains these elements, but they are merely and barely its outward expressions. Irony, humour, theatricality, superficiality, frivolity are the tip of the tip of the iceberg; they are the surface of the camp sea, wide and deep.

A great deal of the discourse on camp invokes its use as a survival strategy; in a hostile world that seeks their violent erasure, queers have devised camp as a shield, as a means of coping with the harsh realities of a life lived on the margins, an existence eked out despite the political, legal and medical institutions, rather than because of them. The equation of camping with coping may be true, but it contains a buried prejudice against camp: to say that camp is a shield, a projected external device, a coping strategy, is to imply that camp is apart from an internal, irreducible, "true" self. It implies that camp is always an act, and can be shed. It

implies that, when the camp queer comes home from a busy day of deflecting persecution by making light of it, he can drop the camping, and revert to an authentic self.

If camp is a survival strategy, a means of coping, it is so in the same way as the white fur of an arctic hare. Camp is an intrinsic part of some queer personae, certainly my queer persona, and is authentic, unshedable. Esther Newton recognizes this: she draws interpretive conclusions from her interviewees, and speaks of “a camp,” shorthand, I suppose, for a campy queer (45). James Saslow identifies a particularized vocabulary as proof of identity; in arguing about the existence of a queer identity in Renaissance Italy, he says that the wide usage of collective nouns like “sodomite” and “catamite” marry an act with a person, and thus imply personae whose intrinsic qualities are so commonly recognized that they can be summarized by these nouns (99). So to use the phrase “a camp,” to turn a verb into a proper noun, implies that there is a set of commonly recognized behaviours and qualities that conglomerate around an identity, a persona.

Camp is not merely extrinsic, projected, a false self. Camp is a vocation, necessitated by outward hostility. It is an intrinsic self, an immune reaction to an environment that would do away with its practitioners.

#### 7. Sontag, *Bloody Sontag*, part 4.

Sontag makes the mistake of calling camp “apolitical” (279). This is obviously, terribly, wrong – even for 1964, it’s wrong – and, in subsequent interviews, she tried to backpedal, or at the very least to amend this mislabeling. She acknowledges homosexuals as the “vanguard” of camp (291). To be sure, one need not be queer to be camp, but it helps. To be camp involves a willingness to embrace grandiosity, hyperbole, flair, exuberance: hyperbole and exuberance are revenge against a culture that would silence you. Not all subcultures have a taste for this kind of revenge; so queers are the mainstay of camp. But Sontag ascribes camp’s invention to a desire to belong, getting the equation of social alienation the wrong way around; desire for assimilation (or, perhaps more charitably, acceptance) and reaction against systemic hostility and oppression should never be confused.

*Of course* camp is political. Camp’s wellspring is political; camp involves not only an awareness of marginality, it depends on marginality – how then can it not be political? It is the act of a marginal populace, it is their imperial project. Queers (as marginal creatures) have no access to the means of an overt socio-cultural or socio-political takeover, no secure place from

which they can achieve direct parity with either the influence or the power of the majority culture, so they claim immaterial things, in both senses of the word “immaterial”:

Unimportant: camp subsumes cultural ephemera and detritus, and translates it into a prized object, fits it into a private, exalted space of beauty, glamour and taste.

Intangible: camp claims that which has no concrete allegiances; it recognizes the difference between, and the separability of, the concrete and what the concrete symbolizes, the real and the iconic. Because the icon has no material consequence in and of itself, camp claims the icon, transforming it to its own uses.

David Bergman tells us that this imperial nature of camp, because it is executed by a marginal culture, is necessarily subversive and destabilizing, but it is imperial, subversive, destabilizing without being bellicose (106-107). It is a means of resisting the oppressor without parroting their discourse. In a glorious turn of phrase, he calls it “finessing the entire issue of power” (107). Yes: camp is imperialism with finesse.

## 8. Can I Call You Wayne?

Wayne Koestenbaum calls camp an act of colonization. Wayne – I want to call him Wayne instead of Koestenbaum. Because so much of my work, my writing, my thought process, is informed by him, I want to assume social proximity by pretending an association on a first-name basis; I want to camp Koestenbaum. He does this with Andy Warhol; throughout his biography, he calls him “Andy,” rather than the more academic “Warhol.” I will do so with Wayne.

According to Wayne, camping an object is colonizing it by treating the object as if it alone exists for us:

When we experience the camp rush, the delight, the savor, we are making a private airlift of lost cultural matter, fragments held hostage by everyone else’s indifference. No one else lived for this gesture, this pattern, this figure, before: only I know that it is sublime.

*(Queen’s Throat 117)*

So camp is colonization by investment: I and I alone recognize the sublimity of an object. Other people might know this object, see it, recognize it, consume it, but I am the only one who knows its intrinsic worth. Thus, the object only exists really and truly for me; in investing it with meaning, in airlifting it out of cultural neglect, I own it. However furtively, however secretly, however privately, it’s mine.

For Wayne, the economy of camp is a means of transubstantiation, of shedding our abjection, our marginality, by claiming metaphorical primacy over an object, being able to invest it with private significance; in other words, by making it a vehicle for meaning. But Wayne also talks of the perversity of camp, especially in reference to the absorption of an icon: “[...] it is necessarily *perverse*, even if it is also *pervasive*, to take a public figure into your own flesh and fancy” (*Jackie* 14, emphasis his). Why perverse? Because this colonization involves reversal: when we colonize an icon, we are reversing a hierarchy; we are taking a star, a socially exalted figure, and extracting that which can be translated into our own mundanity. We are inverting the natural order of the social strata. An inversion of nature: that is what queers are, that is what queers do. Although camp is a very peculiar kind of inversion: it is an outwardly imperceptible inversion, because it involves the realm of private fantasy. In reality, the social hierarchy is left untouched. The star is still the star, the icon is still the icon, the camp is still the camp. But camp allows a conceptual bridge between queer and star; by isolating the intangible icon from its concrete reality, camp maintains the hierarchy, but removes any social and financial impediments to communing with its apex. Stars are still socially and financially unreachable to most of us, but their iconicity can nevertheless be translated into the realm of private self-realization.

Wayne is unthinkable without camp. His entire oeuvre is an exercise of camp, of perverse colonialism. In *Jackie Under My Skin*, his quasi-biography of Jackie O, he leaves concrete Jackie alone, and examines her emanations. He unpacks the Jackie that he is a fan of, the Jackie that he has camped, icon Jackie, the subcutaneous Jackie. *Jackie Under My Skin* is not so much an exposé of Jackie Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, but a deconstruction of his private process of camping Jackie, of securing her place in his dreams and fantasies. In *The Queen's Throat*, Wayne limns a much clearer picture of camp colonial perversity; he camps an art form – opera – and maintains that it itself is a metaphor for queerness, for perversion, for camp. In his biography of Andy Warhol, Wayne finds a partner in crime; he constructs Warhol as someone who devoted his life to camping everything, to perverting everything: electric chairs, car crashes, cats, Marilyn, Liz, Mao, Elvis, women, superstars.

I could deluge you with quote after illustrative quote; if copyright laws permitted, I could copy each of his books and essays and paste them here as one encyclopedic example. Instead, I will, *contra* camp, be spare and tasteful, and limit myself to only one quote, taken from his essay on thrift shopping:

Warhol himself was imitating the macho punks that Genet idolized. Now, if I wear a shirt

that resembles Warhol's, I join a domino game: I'm striving to be Warhol being Genet being the desired convict – a cute guy Chain of Being. (“Thrifting” 29)

Wayne is talking of striped sailor shirts, and, in so doing, he performs an exquisite camp gesture: in one sentence, in one thought, he collapses the commonplace and the extraordinary. A striped shirt launches him into the rarified atmosphere of artistic and literary desire, places him in a constellation of trans-historical lust, allows him to converse with Warhol, with Genet, and ultimately, with the Platonic Ideal of hunky rough trade. And every interpretive utterance is like this; every analytical project seeks to reconcile fan with star, Wayne with his idols.

Perhaps Wayne is camp like I am camp; perhaps his authorial voice is a reflection of his intrinsic self. I'd like to think so. Do people alert him of his all-pervasive campiness? Not being able to ask him personally, I offer the following, in response:

What people have said about “my” masculinity, 1958 to the present:

“Boys don't spit or bite when they fight.”

“Ma'am?”

“Is this the lady of the house?”

“If you don't shut up, I'm going to kick your balls in.” (Koestenbaum, “My Masculinity” 65)

## 9. Irma Vep.

I've spoken of camp in terms of absorption, colonization, perversion, take-over. Is camp a type of vampirism? Camp takes objects, or the essence of objects, in order to feed one's inner self, one's private realm of self-realization. Vampires infect by their bite, make other vampires. Certainly camp is infectious; it is almost impossible to divorce Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, and others from their camp identities. But vampires also drain essences, kill. I don't think camp kills the things it loves. Camping something is still an expression of love, and, because it deals in metaphor, because it finesses power rather than exerts it, because it vaults over hierarchy rather than destroys it, camp still leaves the objects of its affection intact. After all, “camp exists in the smirk of the beholder” (qtd. in Ross 63), and not everybody smirks.

## 10. Camp Morals.

So, after all this, what is camp?

Camp is everything everyone says it is: irony, humour, theatricality, artifice, grandiosity, incongruity, contrasts; but it is not only those things.

Camp is a noun, an identity, a persona, an intrinsic self. To limit its sphere of expression, action and influence to its surface phenomena is to ignore the necessity of its creation, to dismiss the humanity of its user, and ultimately, to make light of the crucible of oppression in which it has formed.

Camp is political, even if inadvertently so; even if its surface is docile, the undercurrents of the wide camp sea are marginality, resistance, survival.

Camp is relational; it is the economy of discoverer and discovered, adulator and adulated.

Camp is a process; it is a verb as well as a noun. It is a means, rather than merely an end, whose inner workings are visible only to its practitioners. The uninitiated can never see camp in action; they see camp's symptoms, rather than its cause.

Camp is the colonizing project of the marginal; in subsuming and translating the outside world, in investing the immaterial with transcendent meaning and grandiosity, it lays claim to its surroundings, it makes vocations of fantasy and interpretation.

Camp is the pole vault of the invert; it leaps across hierarchies, buttressing the pedestrian with the iconic, allowing the commonplace to converse with the magnificent. It acts as the translator between the spheres of the banal and the grandiose, it allows travel between those two realms; camp is the means by which the mundane achieves the sublime.

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