Campish Undertakings:

Design Rationale and Reflection

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Part 1: Design Rationale

Background

As a design student, I have often casually wondered what shapes my perception of aesthetic merit. Throughout my education and budding career, I have created my fair share of marketable work which is informed—consciously or subconsciously—by the aesthetic tastes of authority figures, and I have been implicitly taught what is generally considered to be of good taste. Though I value the design intuition that these experiences have instilled in me, as it will ultimately be advantageous to have tastes which align with those of the general public, I have also always wondered how taste is developed and who decides what is "good taste." Where do my aesthetic dispositions stem from? What do they say about me and my relationship with design?

During the winter semester of 2021, while looking for content to use for an editorial design class, I came across an article titled "Who Decides What's Tacky Anyway?" by author, activist, burlesque performer and instructor Jo Weldon. In the article, Weldon explores what we categorize as "bad taste," how this distinction between "bad taste" and "good taste" comes to be, and what implications it has.

> There's usually some kind of class statement explicitly or subtly included; "tacky" is what is too easily accessible to people either without resources or abusive of the resources they have. Tacky, as a concept, refers to the lack of cultivation or the resistance to taste, and more often than not refers to tastes that are not suitably conservative.[1]

She describes taste as an issue of access, and touches upon the relationship between taste and class. In the same vein, she points out how "tacky," with its decidedly negative connotation, is

[1] Jo Weldon, "Who Decides What's Tacky Anyway?," Literary Hub, August 2, 2018, https://lithub.com/who-decides-whats-tacky-anyway/, para. 4.

often ascribed to marginalized communities. “Tacky is likely to be feminine, ethnic, queer, deviant; not manly, not practical, not businesslike, not serious.”[2] This article pushed me to question how the social situation I am in has shaped my own aesthetic sensibilities, and how they may exist in opposition to predominant tastes.

Like many queer people, I have been attracted to camp ever since I was introduced to it. Even if I didn’t know exactly what it meant or where it came from, I was drawn to its irreverent flamboyance, which represented to me a kind of courage and self-assuredness I have always wanted to embody regarding my identity. I took my final project as an opportunity to delve into this topic. In my project, I wanted to answer the following questions: Why does queer culture have a propensity for the consumption and production of camp? How can queer people use camp to subvert existing power structures?

What is camp?

Taste is not arbitrary. According to Bourdieu, our habitus—or system of dispositions—correlates to the amount of cultural capital we hold.[3] Cultural capital consists of social assets (e.g., educational background, behaviour, appearance, etc.) which enable us to acquire and embody social prestige.[4] Essentially, taste is a function of how we are raised and what we are taught. It also serves to distance class fractions, as people “distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make… in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed”.[5] Aesthetic taste is a way we both demonstrate and maintain our place in society.

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[2] Ibid., para. 5.
[3] Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture,” in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1984), 3-6.
[4] Pierre Bourdieu, “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction.,” in *Power and Ideology in Education*, ed. Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 488.
[5] Bourdieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture,” in *Distinction*, 6.

Building upon this idea of cultural capital, Thornton describes subcultural capital, a specialized form of cultural capital which only holds value in certain contexts. Existing in "vague opposition" to a wider culture, subcultural capital often obfuscates traditional class structures, however, as with any kind of distinction, it forms its own social logic and hierarchy.[6] Camp knowledge can be interpreted as a form of subcultural capital in a queer context.

So what is camp? Camp seems to resist concrete definition, and scholars have varying, sometimes contradictory, definitions of camp. For example, in her seminal essay "Notes on Camp," the ultimate —and oft quoted—camp statement Susan Sontag arrives at is "it's good because it's awful… Of course, one can't always say that."[7] She also generally describes camp as marginal, artificial or exaggerated, loving the passé, and emphasizing style over content.[8] Other scholars such as Mark Booth directly criticize the broadness of Sontag's definition, preferring to clearly differentiate camp from related ideas such as kitsch.[9] According to Booth, "to be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits,"[10] a definition which positions camp in relation to a cultural structure of power. In this way, users of camp resist the restrictive rules of legitimate culture set by those with cultural capital.

Queer people are attracted to camp because they are able to use it as a tool to take that which is not seen as valuable by legitimate culture—meaning the culture of those who hold the most cultural capital in society[11]—and imbue them with specialized value in a camp context.

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[6] Sarah Thornton, "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital," in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), 201-203.
[7] Susan Sontag, *Notes on 'Camp'* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 13.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Mark Booth, "Campe-Toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 68.
[10] Ibid., 69.
[11] Patrick Lie Andersen and Marianne Nordli Hansen, "Class and Cultural Capital—The Case of Class Inequality in Educational Performance," *European Sociological Review* 28, no. 5 (2012), https://www.jstor.org/stable/23272561, 607.

This includes, but is not limited to, aspects of their queer existence. This is explored in Jack Babuscio's essay "Camp and the Gay Sensibility." He defines camp using four key attributes that are given value: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor.[12] He then forms connections between these attributes and the queer experience, and the oppression associated with it. Irony, or incongruity, derives from "the idea of gayness as a moral deviation".[13] What legitimate culture deems incongruous, such as two men or two women in love, is given value through a camp lens. Aestheticism, or the valuing of style over content, exists in opposition to, and calls into question the legitimacy of the puritan morality which marks queerness as a defect.[14] In a camp context, morality is null. Theatricality, or a general life-as-theatre attitude, "implies that roles, and in particular, sex roles, are superficial—a matter of style"[15] and is used to highlight how many of the societal norms we take for granted are fabrications of legitimate culture. Finally, humour is the mechanism by which queer users of camp choose to deal "with the painfully incongruous situation of gays in society."[16] The social situation queer people find themselves in informs what Babuscio calls "the gay sensibility," drawing them to camp and its celebration of deviancy.

In his analysis of interviews with queer consumers of camp, Steven M. Kates posits that camp "is usefully conceptualized as a specialized expression of "subcultural capital" and habitus development."[17] Many of the respondents demonstrated self-awareness about how their social situation and the oppression they face inform their enjoyment of camp, seeing it as a way to

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[12] Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 20.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 21.
[15] Ibid., 24.
[16] Ibid., 27.
[17] Steven M. Kates, "Camp As Cultural Capital: Further Elaboration of a Consumption Taste," *NA - Advances in Consumer Research* 28 (2001), sec. 1.

problematize the existing state of affairs and criticize "normative views on gender and sexuality as exclusive, unduly limiting, and unfair."[18]

In "Uses of Camp," Andrew Ross analyzes camp as "the re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor," creating context-specific value to the waste produced by capitalism's constant consumption.[19] However, he also documents and criticizes how camp has been appropriated and commodified. As camp develops from simply "bad taste" to a legitimate category of taste, it inevitably develops its own hierarchy because "taste is only possible through exclusion and depreciation."[20] As a result of its commercialization, it is once again influenced by those with cultural capital.

The commodification of camp: The 2019 Met Gala

Camp: Notes on Fashion was the theme of the 2019 Met Gala. The Met Gala, formally known as the Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute Benefit, first began in 1948 as a fundraiser for the newly established Costume Institute at the Met.[21] Though it still serves that function, it is better known to the general public as a heavily publicized annual event where famous people dress up in designer clothing—loosely based around a chosen theme—and pose for pictures. A major draw of the event is its exclusivity. Tickets are known to be expensive, reportedly around $30,000 per attendee and $275,000 per table. However, not every guest purchases a ticket, as major fashion houses buy tables and invite celebrity guests to show up dressed in their clothing as a form of promotion. The exorbitant costs are not the only thing restricting entrance to the Met Gala, as it is an invitation-only event. Anna Wintour, the

[18] Ibid., sec. 4.
[19] Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 151.
[20] Ibid., 153.
[21] Vanessa Friedman, "What Is the Met Gala, and Who Gets to Go?," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/fashion/what-is-the-met-gala-and-who-gets-to-go.html, sec. 2.

Editor-in-Chief of Vogue, has the ultimate say on who gets to attend, and often uses her power to invite up-and-coming designers without the funds to buy a table.[22]

The 2019 Met Gala is a prime example of camp being appropriated by those with cultural capital for financial gain. Though the brands that are showcased at the Met Gala are not financially compensated, their presence at this prestigious event contributes to the level of cultural capital they are associated with, and therefore, how much they are worth to consumers. Similarly, the guests' appearance at this exclusive event signals to others that they are considered important and influential. The team behind the Met Gala, Wintour in particular, decides who gets to reap the benefits of being associated with the event. The Met Gala is also a fundraiser for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a beacon of cultural legitimacy. The Met utilizes its existing cultural capital to raise money for itself, which it uses to further cement its position as a cultural touchstone.

Through this commodified presentation of camp, its spirit is watered down. Even though the 2019 Met Gala was meant to highlight camp and camp values, the Met Gala is always rooted in acquiring cultural and economic capital. The designs presented are therefore tailored to fit the values of legitimate culture. Brands present fashion at the Met Gala in order to procure cultural capital and ultimately benefit themselves financially, so if presenting genuine camp does not align with these goals, there is no incentive to do so.

Even if what they show has nothing to do with camp, the general public will perceive the "camp" presented at the Met Gala to be the canon of camp, due to the legitimacy the Met Gala holds. The majority of the Met Gala's core audience most likely does not have an understanding of the ironic and deviant nature of the camp sensibility, so the work presented trickles into the general zeitgeist as what camp should be. Camp is susceptible to losing its identity, and these

[22] Ibid., sec. 2-3, 6, 8-9.

extraordinarily affluent people, whose goal is to gain more influence and money, inadvertently dictate what constitutes good "camp."

Returning the power of camp to queer people

With this project, I am exploring camp aesthetics from my own queer perspective. Within my research, there is a lot of discourse on what camp means and what "counts" as camp. Ultimately, defining the canon of camp—an amorphous and ever-changing concept which exists in relation to mainstream contemporary culture—feels futile. The most important aspect of camp is the transgressive power it gives queer people and other marginalized groups to challenge the status quo by defining new "rules" for what is "good taste."

I aim to challenge the conventional notions of taste we have internalized from legitimate culture. Ultimately, I want to make this project for myself and people like me. Camp can be "an intense mode of individualism and a form of spirited protest."[23] It is used to "play, exaggerate, and gently satirize" in order to challenge underlying assumptions we hold about what is in "good taste."[24] Through the use of camp, queer people have the opportunity to explore what holds value in the contexts they define. This is exemplified in Kates' study "Camp As Cultural Capital: Further Elaboration of a Consumption Taste," wherein the respondent referred to as Russ explicitly examines his own propensity for camp.

> With the way society has ostracized gayness and gays and lesbians in general, we've really had to dig deep right down to our souls and realize, what do we want out of life? What are our true beliefs? What is our purpose in this world? By camp or campiness, I find that we know what our boundaries are.[25]

[23] Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," 21.
[24] Kates, "Camp As Cultural Capital," sec. 5.
[25] Ibid., sec. 4.

For Russ, as well as many of the other men interviewed by Kates, camp "is a means of understanding self in relation to an occasionally hostile society and criticizing normative views on gender and sexuality as exclusive, unduly limiting, and unfair."[26]

I am exploring camp from a queer perspective to counter the commercialization of camp, as described in Ross' "Uses of Camp." The combination of camp's evolution into a legitimate measure of taste and its appropriation for financial gain contributes to its reincorporation into the structure of cultural capital. When camp is made a legitimate category of taste in society, those who hold cultural capital dictate what is good in a camp context. The cultural elite now wield the power the perceived outsiders used to hold. This is problematic because queer people have certain societal disadvantages which make it difficult for them to hold cultural capital.

The American Psychological Association states that people who identify as LGBT are "especially susceptible to socioeconomic disadvantages."[27] Gay and bisexual (sexual minority) individuals report lower personal incomes than their heterosexual counterparts, are less likely to be homeowners, and are more likely to live in poverty, with ethnic minorities within the LGBT community being especially vulnerable.[28] Though economic capital and cultural capital are distinct concepts, an individual's economic (and social) conditions "are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space."[29]

The marginalized, who have long been associated with camp and derive power from its perceived disentanglement from legitimate culture, are losing control of camp. As a result, camp is being watered down, distancing itself from its relationship with queerness, and being used in a

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[26] Ibid.
[27] "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons & Socioeconomic Status," American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010), https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/lgbt, para. 2.
[28] Kerith Conron, Shoshana Goldberg, and Carolyn Halpern, "Sexual Orientation and Sex Differences in Socioeconomic Status: A Population-Based Investigation in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health," abstract, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 72, no. 11 (June 2018), https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2017-209860.
[29] Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," in *Distinction*, 5.

way that is antithetical to its deviant nature. I hope to use my project to put the transgressive power of camp back into the hands of queer people, in particular, me.

Project Proposal: "Campish Undertakings"

"Campish Undertakings" is an exploration of camp that satirizes today's most prominent tastemakers: household brands. Through over-the-top hoax advertisements which parody brands that are generally held in high regard, this campaign aims to encourage consumers to ask the question: "Who gets to decide what is and isn't good taste?"

The first possible response to this campaign is that the viewer believes the advertisements to be genuine. This would insinuate that brand endorses the aesthetics being parodically presented, and they are what legitimate culture currently deems tasteful. Once the viewer eventually figures out that the campaign was a hoax, they question whether the visual standards presented are inherently or were given more worth because it was presented by an entity which possesses cultural capital.

The other possible response to the campaign is that the viewer is not fooled by the campaign. In this case the viewer would interpret the images as simple parodies of the brand. The aim would be to exaggerate and satirize specific aspects of these brands which could be seen as absurd, in order to challenge their place as cultural tastemakers. As well, these advertisements would show the audience the merit in participating in camp and turning a blind eye to conventional taste. As Jo Weldon states, "Tacky, as time has proven by the affection people continue to have for it, is often where the imagination runs free, where the heart is, where the soul is, and where the fun is."[30] By exhibiting my own queer perspective on "so bad, it's good," I

[30] Weldon, "Who Decides What's Tacky Anyway?," para. 18.

aim to position camp in a way that opposes the existing hierarchies of taste and the institutions which uphold them.

Part 2: Reflection

When I initially pitched this project, I saw it as an opportunity to create imagery without the constraints of conventional taste. I thought I would have the freedom to not worry about the perceived taste level of my work—and by association, my perceived taste level as a designer—because it would be done within the context of camp. However, there were some realizations and resulting mental blocks which arose when I began to work on these advertisements.

Even though I knew I was creating images which were intentionally in poor taste, there was still a desire for them to be technically sound. "Stupid, but polished," as I had previously put it. Part of this desire to execute my vision "well" stems from Mark Booth's interpretation of camp, which I have grown to resonate with throughout this process. As Booth states, "to be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits."[31] When I was compositing these images together, I wanted to be putting in a level of effort and care which these concepts would not typically warrant outside of the context of camp. Applying my skills to absurd advertising concepts and grade-school level wordplay was how I was "committing to the marginal."

However, another aspect of this desire also came from the knowledge that I, as the creator of this project, would inevitably be judged. Apparently, I was—and still am—overly concerned with appearing to be a competent individual with marketable skills. If I was going to construct the image of a Starbucks merman throwing giant coffee beans at the viewer, it at least had to demonstrate my proficiency in Photoshop. Over time, my concern surrounding other people's perception of me extended past the technique and visual style of my work, bleeding into the

[31] Mark Booth, "Campe-Toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 69.

content I presented. For example, one of the concepts I proposed was a parody of the Birth of Venus. I am aware that this is not the most original idea or composition, and that parodies of this painting are common to the point of being deemed cliché. Of course, in the case of my project, cliché should be good, but would the audience be privy to the fact that this was a conscious choice? Or would they believe I legitimately thought I was being clever? Unknowingly and uncontrollably, I wanted to appear to be a person with "good taste" who was only producing work in "poor taste" in order to prove a point. Camp, and my relationship with it, was not as simple as "I can do anything, it's camp!"

John Waters is an American filmmaker, writer, actor, and artist known for his transgressive films, characterized by "outrageous subject matter" and "a sense of bad taste" which to many, embody camp.[32] He once famously said, "there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste. To understand bad taste one must have very good taste." Underlying this sentiment is an understanding that in order to consume or consciously produce camp, you must be "in the know" to a certain extent. An active participant in camp rejects the aesthetic ideals of the cultural elite, however, the participant must also have an understanding of what it is that they are rejecting, which itself is a form of cultural capital. In this way, the subversive power of camp is only accessible to some.

It is important to note that though camp is to some extent exclusionary, it does not intend to deride its outsiders. Camp aesthetics are ironic, because the things camp places value on are incongruous with the values of legitimate culture. However, the enjoyment of camp is not inherently ironic. In Sontag's words, "camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation - not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice,

[32] "John Waters," IMDb (IMDb.com, Inc.), accessed April 2, 2022, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000691/.

cynicism. (Or if it is cynicism, it's not ruthless but a sweet cynicism)."[33] Camp starts with a genuine appreciation for the marginal, the uncelebrated, the uncouth. It is rooted in sincere appreciation, in contrast to the kind of satirical enjoyment which implies contempt for those who enjoy the same things in earnest. The latter is the type of enjoyment associated with hipsters. "I would only ever like that *ironically*." It places distance between them and the subjects of their enjoyment, and is used to escape the vulnerability of displaying their true tastes for others to judge. After all, people "distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make,"[34] so these judgements of taste become judgements of status and social prestige, and obfuscating these tastes seems like a direct reaction to this reality. However, this is not what I am trying to achieve. I am trying to knowingly, yet sincerely, enjoy that which is in "bad taste."

In my project, I am deliberately creating camp, or "camping," as Susan Sontag describes it. This is in contrast to pure or naïve camp, which she defines as camp in which the original producer lacks self-awareness.[35] Creating naïve camp seems to be the most accessible, least pretentious way to disregard normative aesthetic values, albeit unknowingly. Naïve camp is conceptually related to the term "outsider art," referring to "any work of art produced by an untrained idiosyncratic artist who is typically unconnected to the conventional art world—not by choice but by circumstance."[36] I will never be able to create outsider art or naïve camp because, in many ways, I am an insider. I have been instilled with the aesthetic values of the cultural elite, and will most likely be a beneficiary of the institution which upholds these standards.

On the other side of the coin, nobody wants to be seen as naïve camp. Obviously, being labelled as such gives you value in a camp context. However, you are also marked as lacking

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[33] Susan Sontag, *Notes on 'Camp'* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 13.
[34] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1984), 6.
[35] Sontag, *Notes on 'Camp'*, 6.
[36] Colin Rhodes, "outsider art," Encyclopedia Britannica, August 29, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/art/outsider-art.

value in the wider, general context, and without self-awareness of where you sit in the hierarchy of legitimate taste. The value of your work relies on the wit of the consumer, or those who frame your work as camp. The Instagram account Good Shirts can be seen as an example of naïve camp. According to their website, "Good Shirts began as an Instagram account documenting the strange and fascinating shirts found in Hanoi, Vietnam."[37] It is clear that the original curator has a sincere appreciation for the "accidental beauty" these shirts exhibit. Through their presence on the account, these shirts were framed as camp. Though the admiration for those who created the shirts is genuine, they are nonetheless positioned as the outsiders to legitimate culture. As Ross put it, "bad taste [is] by no means a clean break with the logic of cultural capital, for it must also be seen from the point of view of those whom it indirectly patronized."[38] Furthermore, as the page has evolved and gained traction, it has developed a certain cynicism. Not everyone views the shirts as fascinating or even interesting, nevermind objects of "accidental beauty." For certain people, Good Shirts is a place to ridicule the broken English, the attempts at emulating widely respected aesthetics, and the general "failed seriousness." They would never be caught dead wearing these shirts, unless of course, they were doing it ironically.

My own fears of being judged on my personal tastes are essentially an intense aversion to being perceived as naïve camp. As much as I have subscribed to camp throughout this project, and as much as I have problematized the way the legitimate culture is constructed, I cannot resist the desire to be taken seriously by the cultural elite. If I present my campy work as self-aware, I can still be respected by those who subscribe to conventional tastes. However, if my project is perceived as a sincere attempt at aesthetic greatness—failed seriousness—I will be an outsider in all respects.

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[37] "About Good Shirts," Good Shirts, accessed April 1, 2022, https://thegoodshirts.com/pages/about-good-shirts.
[38] Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 152-153.

Camp is a powerful tool for countering legitimate culture. Nevertheless, its limitations must be recognized. As a category of taste, it is inherently a system of distinctions requiring active participants of camp to have a baseline understanding of normative aesthetic taste in order to utilize it. Furthermore, a genuine appreciation for the "so bad it's good" can devolve into, or be misunderstood as, scorn for the outsiders of both legitimate culture and camp. Camp has the ability to "play, exaggerate, and gently satirize, exposing underlying assumptions."[39] However this is only possible when we position it against the giants that determine "good taste," refuse to let the cultural elite co-opt its visual language, and legitimately appreciate the merit in the marginal.

[39] Steven M. Kates, "Camp As Cultural Capital: Further Elaboration of a Consumption Taste," *NA - Advances in Consumer Research* 28 (2001), sec. 5.

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