

Detouring between the Mass and Elite Culture: Research on Susan Sontag's Camp Sensibility

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Abstract: Susan Sontag's 1964 essay, "Notes on 'Camp'," was penned against the backdrop of a pervasive elitist culture in New York. Through her exploration of Camp taste and its corresponding artistic styles, Sontag scrutinizes the rigid standards and hierarchical orders within the context of art criticism, challenging the conventional dichotomy of good versus bad art and moral aesthetic criteria. Sontag emphasizes the aesthetic function inherent in language and artistic forms, uncovering marginalized and even theatricalized non-mainstream expressions. She advocates for a life experience that transcends utilitarianism, through a sensuous engagement, and calls for a return of art to life and to the core of aesthetic sensibility. More importantly, her narrative adopts an "innocent" stance of a bystander, artfully detouring between the culture and tastes of mass culture and elite culture. The introduction of 'Camp' creates a possibility for transcending the boundaries between mass culture and elite culture, and for facilitating interaction in the implementation of aesthetic experiences through education. It connects the communicative exchange processes among individuals and groups at the level of tools or media.

1. Introduction

Susan Sontag, in her essay "Notes on 'Camp'" published in the Fall 1964 issue of *Partisan Review*, successfully crafted the concept of "Camp" and articulated her aesthetic and cultural stance. Through fifty-eight aphoristic sentences that are seemingly paradoxical, she discussed "Camp" in a tranquil yet intense manner, employing a playful tone to critique and mock the cultural context and art criticism system of the time. Sontag dismissed the excavation of hidden meanings in artworks and advocated for a pure aesthetic experience through a dramatized bystander's perspective. She argued for the abolition of the hierarchical system that classifies art into good or bad tastes. The introduction of "Camp" by Sontag helped forge a powerful cohort around marginalized tastes within popular culture, also giving rise to a fresh discourse of criticism. Consequently, Rollyson and Paddock regard (2016, p. 50) this intellectual, basking in a "Hollywood star-like aura" [8]. She was also labeled and amidst the public's embrace and anticipation (Kennedy, 1995, p.1) [4].

2. The Anti-Intellectualism of the Wise

"Notes on 'Camp'" was written during a tumultuous period in American history. The 1960s saw the emergence of Hippie movement and the New Left, as young people began to abandon traditional moral values. The social and political unrest, coupled with a deep-seated spirit of rebellion, inevitably found expression in literature and art. This era signaled a transition from Modernism to

Postmodernism. Led by formalist critics like Clement Greenberg, cultural elites revered massive abstract forms and the flatness of paintings, endorsing movements like Action Painting and Color-Field Painting. Along with Greenberg's notions of "masculinity, virility, and individualism", these elements collectively shaped human subjectivity, and to devise a form of modernist visual representation (Leja, 1993, p. 9) [5]. However, Greenberg's avant-garde and modernist art, aimed at repudiating the products of the capitalist culture industry, were described by him as "Kitsch," a term for art infused with consumerism (Greenberg, 1939) [3]. Consequently, under the bourgeois class hierarchy, mass culture was shaped into a slightly derogatory consumer product, its aesthetic value judgments confined to binary oppositions. This backdrop led to the creation of an overly rigid and petrified system of critique within the American cultural sphere, particularly biased towards high culture and elite art.

It was precisely within this context that Sontag introduced "Camp," questioning the seriousness of art interpretation and the elitist inclination in cultural taste, proclaiming, "it is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world" (Sontag, 1966, p. 7) [10]. She criticized the illusions of art interpretation that heavily rely on Freudian psychology and the incessant mining for hidden metaphors, deeming it a "as *manifest content*" (Sontag, 1966, p. 7) [10]. On the other hand, Sontag also opposes the vulgarization of Marxist critique and methods of interpreting social events through art (Zhou, 2007) [14]. At first glance, Sontag's critique might seem to oppose intellectual thought (anti-

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intellectual), but in reality, she opposes excessive overthinking. She noted, “To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it” (Sontag, 1966, p. 275) [10]. She detested the type of thinking that seeks to unearth hidden meanings and is based on rigid aesthetic value judgments, rather than opposing knowledge and intellect per se. Therefore, Sontag advocated for “bombard our senses” (Sontag, 1966, p. 13), dismissing the judgment system of taste to bring art back to life and erase the boundaries between the two [10]. We find that Sontag, like a cultural priestess, opposes intellect in a seemingly stubborn yet decisively intellectual manner.

Sontag employed an aphoristic, note-style format to articulate “Camp,” replacing the conventional form of progressive, logical speculation. “The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious” (Sontag, 1966, p. 282), she asserted, juxtaposed with, “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious” (Sontag, 1966, p. 288) [10]. These seemingly contradictory statements serve to introduce Camp as a rejection of solemn aesthetic value judgments and a declaration of discarding established norms. This is in response to the long-standing Western philosophical tradition of deliberating art within the confines of Greek mimesis—viewing art either as a useless or a useful replication of reality. These opposing viewpoints continually resurface in art critique and theory. In the analysis of consciousness that adheres to an established conceptual order, anthropocentric metaphysics prevailed. Through the introduction of Camp, Sontag aimed to level the field of metaphysical concepts, highlighting the independent aesthetic function of artistic language, questioning the a priori nature of experience. She calls for introspection and attention to marginalized situations, constructing aesthetic values on a utopian impulse. Thus, it is evident that Sontag seeks to dismantle not only the hierarchical system of serious art but also to reassess the value stance on rationality and subjectivity that has prevailed since Descartes.

Hence, the introduction of Camp was not solely to satirize the rigid critique system of the time or to bemoan the demise of individuality and aesthetic judgment in mass culture’s art creation. It was more about dramatically expressing aesthetic sensibility. As an open form of aesthetic and cultural thoughts, Camp aligns with the non-utilitarian (both experiential and moral) and non-cognitive (ideological and conceptual systems) aspects of aesthetics, returning to an original stance in aesthetics (Zhang, 2011) [15]. Based on this foundation of aesthetic values, Sontag gradually detached from the New York cultural scene’s dichotomy of highbrow versus lowbrow. She suspended judgment on taste, elevating Camp to a critical state and navigating, with the wise person’s stance, between mimicry and self-mockery.

3. The Neutrality of Taste

Although both Sontag and Clement Greenberg endeavor to distinguish themselves as exceptional “taste makers,” Camp’s taste, in contrast to Greenberg’s loftily positioned formalist criticism, not only serves as an irony to intellect and authority but also shows indifference to the

hierarchical judgment of taste. This attitude served to dissolve the contradiction between popular and elite cultures, thereby reshaping “avant-garde” position of Camp.

Initially, Sontag revisited David Hume’s perspective: “Taste has no system and no proofs” (Sontag, 1966, p. 276), and stated that “Camp taste turns its back on the good-had axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment” (Sontag, 1966, p. 286) [10]. In doing so, she deftly navigates Camp taste among elite culture, avant-garde culture, and mass culture, traversing between through “bad art” and “kitsch.” The neutrality of taste reflects Sontag’s balanced approach to dealing with contradictions and conflicts. Camp, with an elitist’s detached demeanor, contemplates high and low culture with a blend of “dramatic” and “humorous” elements, as she notes, “The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves” (Sontag, 1966, p. 289) [10]. The neutral taste of Camp involves aesthetic appreciation moving back and forth among different groups, preserving the potential existence and evolution of these three cultural forms.

However, it’s precisely this circuitous nature that renders the sensibility attributed to Camp elusive, leading Sontag to find a foothold among marginalized groups, thereby infusing Camp with a cutting-edge spirit. She regarded marginalized communities, such as homosexuals and Jews, as “the best creators of modern sensibility,” and expressed admiration for their “methods of seduction” and “dualistic postures.” Thus, the Camp sensibility reflects an aesthetic taste that connects to the universal plight of the general populace (Xu, 2010) [13]. Sontag not only presented an appreciation for the eclectic tastes within anti-mainstream culture but also alluded to at avant-garde artists who rose from popular culture, like Andy Warhol.

Undoubtedly, within the bourgeois hierarchy, the dominant cultural system tends to favor the privileged classes and is considered a conventional collective consensus. Consequently, Camp inevitably acquires a layer of meaning as a form of resistance by the less privileged (Xu, 2010) [13]. The neutrality of taste claimed by Camp is not only embraced by marginalized groups but also serves as an aesthetic tool for women under the patriarchal rule, who are often deemed devoid of intellectual substance. It possesses a neutral “androgynous” characteristic (Piggford, 1997) [7]. Thus, in such a cultural and historical context, Camp serves as an ironic deconstruction of the long-standing cultural consensus, biological gender, and the social gender reference system, raising questions about aesthetic value judgments and the system of gender roles,

Sontag suspended judgment of taste and shifted the discovery of social art to the realm of Camp style, placing greater emphasis on the form of culture. This move broadened the conceptual and material tension within artistic language, grounding the subject’s rational consciousness into a sensuous aesthetic experience. She wrote, “Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style” (Sontag, 1966, p. 279) [10]. We find that in Sontag’s aesthetic philosophy, the “aura” of art illuminates, drawing subjects into an engagement with emotions, sensations, and experiences, thus reflecting

the objective reality of the world. However, traditional critique systems have tended to confine the standards of art's quality to specific content scopes, subjecting works to the dual pressures and shaping of moral and aesthetic standards, and constructing them with similar critical theories. This perpetuates a cycle of discourse. For Sontag, such a monotonous order and taste render artistic styles as indistinct and dull as cookies cast from the same mold. The sensibility of Camp accentuates style, affirming the ordinary or marginalized styles that lie between established standards. It pulls the a priori subjective world back into the realm of lived aesthetic experience, aiming to uncover a presence that is often overlooked.

It's evident that Sontag's and Greenberg's systems of critique markedly diverge. Greenberg regards popular culture as "kitsch," positioning it in stark opposition to avant-garde culture on one hand, and elevating avant-garde culture to an elitist concept, considered as a sensitive standard of appreciation, on the other (Greenberg, 1939) [3]. Motivated by the anticipated concept of empirical rationality, Greenberg's formalist critique establishes a hegemony of order. Additionally, the prevalent unconscious theories of the 1960s, by dominating everything with a one-sided a priori subjectivity, suppressed the overall societal cultural emphasis on the emotions and values inherent in life itself. In response, Sontag believes that an overproduction of elitist discourse led to contemporary culture being overwhelmed by vulgar forms and styles, akin to a form of torture, framing sentiments and impulses that should naturally resonate with life itself. Thus, the introduction of Camp not only challenges the critique systems that heavily focuses on formal quality but also counters the tool-like interpretive discourse structured by subconscious theories.

4. The "Naïveté" of Camp Sensibility

Undeniably, Camp has responded to and re-evaluated various aspects, including the hierarchy of taste, the aesthetic experience of style and form, and the general situation of marginalized groups. Rather than categorizing its users in a simplistic hierarchy, Camp presents an air of naïveté. In Sontag's portrayal of Camp, she refers to three kinds of sensibilities: the moral sensibility of elite culture, the emotional extremity of avant-garde art, and the pure aesthetic sensibility of Camp (the latter being the "Camp sensibility" referred to in this text). She openly expresses her admiration for Oscar Wilde, declaring "Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism" (Sontag, 1966, p. 277) [10]. She reaffirms Wilde's view of "art for art's sake," recognizing art's profound experiential influence on life and its power to challenge and dismantle the drudgery of enslaving conventions and tyrannical norms. It is evident that Sontag aligns with the humanistic camp, equating aesthetics with an immersion in life, will, and emotions. Only through pure aesthetic sensibility can we set aside the usual standards of right and wrong, good and bad, useful and useless, thus enabling a reevaluation and transcendence of the traditional "ideal models of truth, goodness, and beauty." This maximizes the self-discipline and independence of aesthetics. As Dr. Wang Qiuhai

articulates (2011), Camp sensibility aligns with Nietzsche's willpower and sensory experience. When the conscious subject views a work aesthetically, the self-discipline of aesthetics differentiates everyday associations from aesthetic ones, expanding the conscious situation of aesthetic associations and allowing art to manifest as a driving force [12].

Sontag believes that the crux of aesthetics is to diminish the dominance of ideological control. "Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (Sontag, 1966, p. 277), she asserts, marking the distinction between aesthetics and societal or political indoctrination [10]. Indeed, Sontag's views somewhat diverged from those of certain left-wing intellectuals. For instance, Herbert Marcuse (1976), starting from Freudian psychoanalysis and adopting a Marxist stance, attempted to shift the leftist movement from the streets to the realm of scholarly discourse, emphasizing a sensual revolution to forge new habits of aesthetic perception, and transforming aesthetics into a tool for political purposes [6]. Sontag, however, held a differing opinion on this matter. Although she later actively engaged in politics, she maintained a focus on pure experience in the realm of aesthetics, upholding the self-discipline of art.

Regardless, intellectuals in the 1960s were committed to articulating popular culture in a more refined, elevated manner, attempting to "save" the public's aesthetic judgment. In fact, the term "Camp" (se Camper) has its origins in French, carrying a noticeable hue of Continental elitism and subtly implying a division of class. Sociologist Andrew Ross (1988), in his article, compared "Camp" with schlock and kitsch, criticizing it as the favor of hypocrisy [9]. As Sontag herself lamented in her essay, "Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies," in societies or circles capable of experiencing the "psychopathology of affluence." Hence, "Notes on 'Camp'" can be seen as a guide with elitist traits, marked by a naïve stance.

Camp, navigating neutrally between elite and popular culture, also oscillates between the tastes of connoisseurs and amateurs. Cultural experts, possessing power and discourse, evidently hold more cultural capital compared to amateurs. The focus and detached observer stance as proposed by Camp undeniably form a kind of symbolic sympathy. However, most middle-class admirers, caught in between, hardly qualify as experts but rather serve as preservers of cultural order. As Thomas Hess points out, Camp culture is replete with the feigned smiles of its spectators. From this, it is clear that although Sontag seeks to democratize art through the aphoristic power of "Camp," there still remains a sense of alienation and distance at the class level, potentially reinforcing the divide between the elite and the masses once more.

Moreover, in the subsequent ideological discourse, Camp has been downgraded due to continuous discursive production. As Mark Booth (1983) puts it, "To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits" [1]. On one hand, the taste of Camp, existing within a collective textual framework, allows its neutral stance to be exploited for manipulating extreme viewpoints and can even stereotype Camp into a categorical imagery. On the other

hand, Camp is prone to fostering fragmented interpretations, such as being seen as “something for a small circle,” “odd or even outrageous taste,” “secret codes,” or “markers of identity.” These interpretations can lead to a fragmented understanding of Camp, positioning it as a representative of marginal cultures. Unintentionally, Sontag “became” a symbolic figure of feminism (Tamas & Wilkinson, 2005, p. 361) [11]. In response to this, Sontag retorted: “It had nothing to do with ‘the privilege of the intellectuals!’... I’m actually against reductive interpretation, and I’m against facile transposition and the making of cheap equivalences” (Chan, 2001) [2].

Regardless, in the decades following the publication of “Camp,” taste continued to be actively reflected in the opinions of authoritative figures. The commercialization in consumer society has further contributed to the mediocrity of popular culture, eroding people’s sensibilities. Capitalism has prevailed over aesthetics, evidently surpassing the realm of pure sensory enjoyment. In Sontag’s later writings, she reluctantly acknowledged that the era in which the essay was written would never return, and Camp had lost its original text and context.

However, Sontag’s emphasis on sensitivity and aesthetic experience not only touches upon a nostalgic longing but also ignites the intrinsic overlap between oneself and the world. Furthermore, as there is a periodic introspection among disciplines such as art, culture, and science regarding the forms of knowledge and rational cognition, the journey of seeking beauty consistently explores the “truth.” By expanding perception and conceptualizing modal knowledge of things, it awakens the vividness of emotions, deepens aesthetic sensitivity, and enriches the sensory order and modulation of all things—a focal point of contemporary aesthetic education.

5. Conclusions

Over the past half-century, evaluations of Sontag’s aesthetic thought have polarized. Her followers are enchanted by her descriptions of Camp, characterized by its fashionable features and anti-intellectual undertones, while her critics dismiss Camp as being akin to a poet of superficial charm or a shrewd, smooth-talking social critic. Although Sontag did not originate terms like style and sensibility, her approach as an observer with elite characteristics may seem like “old wine in new bottles.” Yet, it was through Camp that Sontag has achieved a uniquely enticing and dramatic aesthetic attitude. Faced with the intricate tapestry of cultural diversity, she maintains a state of awakening in both daily life and aesthetic experiences.

Particularly, the proposition of camp, at the junction between the modern and postmodern era, involves the excavation of alternative, overlooked cultures, as well as the rapidly emerging mass and popular culture. In the 1960s, Susan Sontag had already perceived the importance of sensibility in altering the function of art. She actively explored the shift and renewal in contexts such as public interaction with works, site and social interaction, space and cultural situation, and aesthetic circles. Consequently, Sontag’s aesthetic thought also contemplates the

interaction between the artist and the viewer, as well as the removal of cultural identity and ideological burdens in aesthetic education. In today’s diverse cultural landscape, marked by interdisciplinary and trans-regional interactions, the advocacy for a refined aesthetic sensibility, the reinforcement of connections with emotions and life experiences, and the emphasis on embracing the richness of everyday life experiences remain vital. Sontag’s insights continue to be a profound source of inspiration for educators, fostering an appreciation for the nuanced interplay between art and life.

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