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Popular Culture, Kitsch as Camp, and Film

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Abstract: In his article, "Popular Culture, Kitsch as Camp, and Film," Benton Jay Komins argues that at the crossroads of kitsch, between the irresistibly human and total spuriousness (Milan Kundera's and Clement Greenberg's respective definitions), lies the first serious glimmer of camp. Komins evaluates the connections between the phenomenon of kitsch and the phenomenon of camp through a theoretical discussion and the cinematic language of Percy Adlon's *Rosalie Goes Shopping* (1989-90). Critics like Susan Sontag and Andrew Ross, as well as Adlon's film, ask us to consider if camp is a pretentious expression of kitsch that belongs to the "artsy" demimonde. As Komins argues, two questions lie at the heart of the camp phenomenon: How does the camp sensibility contribute to contemporary interpretations of art and what promise of change does it playfully conceal?

Benton Jay KOMINS

Popular Culture, Kitsch as Camp, and Film

Milan Kundera and Clement Greenberg write about kitsch that "For none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition" (Kundera 256) and that "Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money" (Greenberg 10). At the crossroads of kitsch, between Kundera's notion of the irresistibly human and Greenberg's total spuriousness, lies the first serious glimmer of camp. Can we locate, or for that matter begin to define, camp in the arena of contemporary culture? Is this seductive phenomenon a preposterously pretentious expression of kitsch, which belongs to the "artsy" demimonde? Camp, or rather its essence, has been defined as "a love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration ... something of a private code, a badge of identity" (Sontag 105). In this paper, I discuss the phenomenon of camp through the cinematic language of Percy Adlon's *Rosalie Goes Shopping* (1989-90) (for a commercial account of the film, please see *Rosalie Goes Shopping* <http://www.imdb.com/Title?0098224>; for a German description of Percy Adlon's oeuvre, see *Kick Film* < http://www.kickfilm.de/adlon.html > [inactive]). Rather than approaching the film in its entirety, I discuss three dense sequences which highlight camp sensibility. My understanding and interpretation of this filmic material begs two questions at the heart of the camp phenomenon: How does camp sensibility contribute to contemporary interpretations of art, and what promise of change does it playfully conceal?

Before Rosalie's seductive sequences, I must put the discourse of camp into perspective, beginning with a modernist fantasy of beauty's inherent ugliness. Georges Bataille's notion of a "strange mise-en-scène" or active process of denuding the beautiful object of its illusion of totality, begins to open space for camp possibilities. "Do not all beautiful things run the risk of being reduced to a strange mise-en-scène, destined to make sacrilege more impure? And the disconcerting gesture of the Marquis de Sade, locked up with the madmen, who had the most beautiful roses brought to him only to pluck off their petals and toss them into a ditch filled with liquid manure? In these circumstances, does it not have an overwhelming impact?" (Bataille 12). As Sade's prison compatriot tears up rose petals and then cavalierly tosses them into a stinking pool of manure, the camp moment disassembles mainstream ideas of beauty. Through dismemberment and disassembling, Bataille's hero breaks down the oppositional concepts of beauty and ugliness; he ruins their oppositional drama. Bataille juxtaposes the literal object -- the referent of the rose in nature -- to various poetic "rose inflections" to demonstrate the ambiguity at the heart of beauty; the only resolution of this floral dilemma rests in the ugly interface of the natural, literal representation and the poetic image, the rose in the "mind of the genius."

"It is impossible to exaggerate the tragicomic oppositions indicated in the course of this death drama -- the life-cycle of flowers -- endlessly played out between earth and sky, and it is evident that one can only paraphrase this laughable duel by introducing, not as a sentence, but more precisely as an ink stain, this nauseating banality: Love smells like death ... the most admirable flower ... would not be represented by the verbiage of the old poets, as the faded expression of an angelic ideal, but, on the contrary, as a filthy and glaring sacrilege" (Bataille 12). In its state of disgustingly sweet ripeness, the literal rose represents death's decay. The natural cloying fragrance of Bataille's rose and death are synonymous; poetic representations are but "ink stains" that "wither" this reality. Depicting the beautiful object as an "angelic ideal" constitutes an act of sacrilege; to Bataille, poetic beauty becomes the lie which denies its own banality. If the culturally constructed ideal of totalized beauty represents a sacrilege, then the portrayal of pastiched moments represents an effort to move realistically beyond aestheticized lies to the realm of experience.

Towards a Theory of Camp

In "Notes on 'Camp'" Susan Sontag and in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* Andrew Ross rely upon notions of poetic beauty and aestheticized ugliness to develop readings of the camp

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phenomenon, highlighting the dimensions of Bataille's ambiguous rose. Where Sontag concentrates on the particulars of camp -- or what properly can be labeled "camp" -- Ross delves into the pleasures of camp, privileging its active force in contemporary popular culture and politics. Sontag tries to position herself outside the camp phenomenon; while she is drawn to camp, she does not wholeheartedly share in its given sensibility: "I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion" (278). Does Sontag want to assign value to camp? Or, does she attempt to categorize its manifestations? Is exploration or reductive explication at the heart of her camp agenda? In an emphatic way, Sontag's sympathy and revulsion collapse into an understanding of the pastiche that is at the camp phenomenon's center because camp itself compels ambiguous reactions. While Sontag attempts to define camp through people and things, she discovers camp's seductive dimension of denuding. It is the very artifice about which she writes that strips away illusions of critical judgment. Her reaction of sympathetic revulsion positions her within camp's dialogical exchange and she fully shares in this given sensibility on account of the ambivalent reaction that she has to it: "Not only is there a Camp vision, a Camp way of looking at things. Camp is as well a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons. There are 'campy' movies, clothes.... This distinction is important. True, the Camp eye has the power to transform experience. But not everything can be seen as Camp. It's not all in the eye of the beholder" (Sontag 279).

What is this power to "transform experience?" If the camp phenomenon is "not all in the eye of the beholder," then where could it rest other than in the interface of the object's presence and the engaged eye? Sontag reads camp as essentially contentless, a "celebration of style or the high art of kitsch" (283). Where kitsch takes itself seriously, camp joyously celebrates in its own ridiculous non-sequiturs. But a problem lies at the center of this contentlessness which centers on the concept of the démodé. Throughout the essay, Sontag emphasizes camp's privileging of past cultural failures; from the ornate poetic language of les Précieux to the flamboyant details of art nouveau, camp sympathizes with past cultural failures. This point becomes problematic when it is read against Walter Benjamin's concept of the productive démodé which he develops in "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia." Benjamin reads an element of "profane illumination" which ignites revolutionary possibility in the surrealists' privileging of the antiquated and rusticated. According to Benjamin, "They [the surrealists] bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' to the point of explosion" (182). The privileging of démodé objects in both the revolutionary eyes of the artist and the awakened eyes of the spectator represents a political gesture, or an escape from commodity culture; a reappropriated démodé becomes the initial step towards liberation.

Against the cultural debates of the late-1950s and early-1960s, we might understand Sontag's reading of a contentless démodé; in a way, she almost integrates camp sensibility into the language of new criticism, the dominant critical discourse at that time (to fathom Sontag's take on camp fully, I propose, we must consider her own position within new criticism). She reintegrates camp into high modernism through her emphasis on self-awareness and self-referentiality. Just as the high modernist novel construed itself as an autonomous ground for change, so could the camp object transform experience. For Sontag, camp exists as the self-reflexive aristocrat of popular culture. Sontag reads camp as a way to be a dandy in the age of mass culture against modern philistinism and the nausea of the replica (see 290). As she is drawn to and repelled by camp simultaneously, she becomes its ultimate engaged subject. Where she attempts to position herself, like the nineteenth-century dandy in the role of taste maker, she succeeds in demonstrating the power of the phenomenon. Camp only exists in the interface of the object and the receiver; by trying to determine what constitutes camp, Sontag demonstrates what camp does. Unlike Sontag, Ross focuses on camp's place in contemporary popular culture and he embeds the camp moment into defined social space. Ross even locates a political side to camp: In his reading, camp sensibility and the camp object casts light on existing definitions and clichés. Camp subversively

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works with existing cultural materials. According to Ross "The exercise of camp taste raised different issues, for example, for gay people, before and after 1969; for gay males and for lesbians; for women, lesbian and straight, before and after the birth of the sexual liberation movements; for straight males, before and after androgyny had become legitimate; for traditional intellectuals, obliged now, in spite of their prejudices, to go 'slumming,' and for organic intellectuals, whose loyalty to the Pop ethic of instant gratification, expendability, and pleasure often seemed to leave no room for discriminations of value" (137). Camp became a mode of style, understanding and sensibility for gays, lesbians and women who were formerly excluded from the cultural mainstream.

The camp object or performance has multiple audiences, each of which extracts different politically expedient issues from the material; through this emphasis on message extraction, Ross democratizes Sontag's aristocratism. Camp no longer is portrayed as a privileged expression of any one group; in the true spirit of its inherent pastiche, it takes on multiple meanings. Massive changes in the production and distribution of cultural products allowed this message proliferation to take place. Central to Ross' argument is the impact of audio-visual technology, most specifically the mass advent of television in the early-1960s on the democratization of cultural reading. Owing to its inherent individualized mode of reception, television allowed the viewer to read literally into the message; what was extracted, and how it was applied, became contingent upon individual viewer's desires. Unlike the theater or the cinema, the television viewer was freer to reflect upon content without outside interferences. Thus, Ross' reading of televised Hollywood films like *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1961) binds cultural democratization to the démodé. The resurrection of this film in the late-1960s highlights both the power of the new medium of television and a new morbid sense of nostalgia; in effect, the fascination with the film injects Sontag's sympathy for the démodé with an almost Benjaminian notion of "active appropriation." As Ross notes, "In *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*," cult taste is exploited for the mainstream, as never before" (138). Implicit to this concatenation of sympathy and active employment is redefinition. Ross comments on the impact on the film extensively; *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* is a film about the incongruous presence of a fossilized Hollywood child-star in the age of the televised global village. There is no place for Baby Jane Hudson in modern mass culture; the viewer can only cannibalize her image. The camp phenomenon surfaces not only through the outlandish performances of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, but also through an effective de-fetishization of the Hollywood's myth of the child star. According to Ross, "The products (contract stars in this case) of a much earlier mode of production, which had lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, became available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste" (139). The camp moment emerges in this redefinition and as a political gesture, camp is the rereading of old cultural categories through present sensibilities, allowing individuals to personally reappropriate the démodé. Ultimately, camp is the active process of working through extant cultural material.

***Rosalie Goes Shopping*: When Kitsch Becomes Camp**

The first dining room sequence in *Rosalie Goes Shopping* opens up the possibility of reading everyday play through a camp sensibility. From the beginning of the sequence, we are transported visually into a camp world of everyday subversiveness; the idiosyncrasies of the Adlon's characters force us to reflect upon the useful secrets of American family life. According to Michel de Certeau, "Many everyday practices (talking, shopping, cooking etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many 'ways of operating': victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong' ... clever tricks, and knowing how to get away with things" (xix). Through the tactics of this cinematic family's everyday life we are invited to see the possibilities of camp. Camp and everyday tactics: Specifically, who gets away with what? Now comes the moment of fascination: In order to understand the family's tactics, we need to enter their created world, allowing the Adlon's film to seduce us.

Before I describe the verbal and visual aspects of the sequence, let me introduce its cast of characters. Flanking each end of an enormous table are the ectomorphic imbecile, Mr. Greenspace, and the endomorphic criminal, Mrs. Greenspace, better known throughout the film as Liebling Ray

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and Rosalie. While the small boyish actor Brad Davis plays the role of Ray and Marianne Sägebrecht -- who previously appeared in the films *Sugarbaby* and *Baghdad Café* -- plays the role of Rosalie. Wedged between the proud parents is a brood of children: "Schnucki," a gourmet chef; Barbara, an angry computer operator; "Schatzi," an irrepressible teenage ladykiller; "Herzi," a preteen gymnast; and finally, "die Mädchen," absolutely identical twin morons. April, a visiting belle, also joins the sumptuous family meal. Most of the family members have colloquial Bavarian nicknames. In this, for instance, Adlon maximizes every kitschig opportunity in the film; with its beloved lawn dwarves and other serious everyday accessories, Bavaria indeed is one of the birth places of West European kitsch, including that mecca of American tourists, king Ludwig's and Wagner's Neuschwanstein, the prototype of Disney World's castle. Despite the suggestive name of Stuttgart -- we cannot forget that Swabia borders Bavaria -- these affectionate bayerische Namen deviate from small town American norms; they are quite shocking in a small Arkansas hamlet. Like their names, the family's table talk also deviates from expectation: Not only is their conversation richly peppered with elements of trite German folk culture, it also parodies nouveau riche excess. I now turn to the sequence's astounding dialogue: Liebling Ray enters the dining room in a satin bathrobe. He greets everyone at the table with a kiss; he greets each of his children by proper, Bavarian name. Almost hypnagogically, the camera moves from character to character:

> April: "What are are all these weird names? I thought you said your name was...."
> Schatzi: "Nicknames."
> April: "Whatta' you call your Pa?"
> Schatzi: "Liebling. It means darling."
> [Enormous plates of gourmet food are placed by the twins on the table.]
> April: "You'all eat like this every night?"
> Schatzi: "You bet!"
> [At Rosalie's request, Schatzi recites grace in a horribly accented dialect of German]
> April: "That Swedish?"
> Schatzi: "German."
> April: "Pentecostal?"
> Rosalie (Every word is pronounced with a thick German Accent): "Catholic."
> April: "Oh? What's the difference?"
> Rosalie: "Confession!"
> April: "Huh...."
> Rosalie: "You admit your sins and there not sins anymore."
> [Schnucki, in full chef uniform, stands at his place with feigned dignity.]
> Schnucki: "That was a snail soup with tarragon and crème fraîche [pronounced as cweme fwesh] and...."
> Liebling Ray: "And a touch of cognac!"
> Schnucki: "Got it!"
> [An uproar of applause accompanies this respite of culinary repartee.]
> April: "Snails, really?"
> Rosalie: "Where are you from, April?"
> April: "Little Rock."
> Rosalie: "I am from Bad Tölz, a very pretty town in Bavaria, West Germany."
> April: "How'd you get here in Arkansas?"
> Rosalie: "I'm a peacetime war bride. And Ray was an army scout pilot in my home town. We fell in love."
> Liebling Ray: "And we have been ever since."

The dialogue continues: Between Schnucki's announcements of each lavish gourmet dish, April continues to ask questions about the Catholic rite of confession. Rosalie cheerfully answers the questions, emphasizing the "cleansing effect" of the rite. The dialogue ends with April's nervous request for ketchup.

A tactics of everyday life? The Greenspace clan sit down to an extravagant ten course feast every evening. These ritualized dinners parody the ostentatious haute bourgeoisie at the same time that they present case studies in retail fraud; enterprising Rosalie does her daily shopping with rubber checks and delinquent credit cards. The regal Greenspace banquets are ways to beat the system; through their conscious parody of nouveau riche excess, this family playfully undermines the base of the economic system. Reveling in the absolving power of confession -- throughout all of her schemes, Rosalie remains a "good," conscientious Catholic -- the loving business manager-mother admits to her manipulation of the credit system. A subversive aspect of

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the family's cheating centers on its convenient use of religion; confession becomes Rosalie's justification for ripping off neighbors and local merchants. In her matriarchal logic, a day without shopping is a day without love. Where confession absolves the temporary sins of shoplifting and petty larceny, it cannot relieve the sentimental guilt pangs of forgetting the daily consumer needs of a family. Through religious Rosalie, Adlon presents a cinematic translation of Kundera's "dictatorship of the heart that reigns supreme in kitsch" (250). In the Greenspace family's world, loving consumer needs take precedence over social contracts.

But my question now is this: If this type of kitsch has a subversive edge, then where does camp surface? When romance enters the sequence, camp sensibility rears its head. At the table, between gulps of escargot and snatches of banal conversation, Ray and Rosalie tell their story; Rosalie was brought to her American dreamland of milk and honey by Ray (a "peacetime" pilot), as a "peacetime war bride." What exactly does this catachrestic construction "peacetime war" mean? The war bride, normally a beautiful foreign woman who meets a dashing American soldier, endures as cultural baggage of Hollywoodiana (in the canonical version of this romance, the happy couple put aside cultural differences for the sake of love). Could the boyish imbecile Ray and cunning Hausfrau Rosalie possibly be the sweet innocents of Hollywood legend? While the peacetime war bride Rosalie -- now "a beleibte fraud artist" -- runs the illicit family business, Ray, trusting the moxie of his creative wife, shirks all responsibilities; throughout the film he remains boyish, a willing innocent in his wife's entrepreneurial games. It is here that this almost scandalous reinterpretation of a past cultural myth invites a camp reading: In the Greenspace's dining room, we reread cultural clichés and Hollywood stereotypes, allowing camp sensibility to add a layer of meaning to the film.

Unlike the dining room sequence, the second sequence remains purely cinematic; no elements of dialogue intrude upon Adlon's poignant depiction of Bavaria displaced. The dialogues inject this rendition of local color with two registers of kitsch: First, the carnivalesque antics of a raucous Bavarian festival and second, Rosalie's teary-eyed nostalgia for her Mitteleuropa home. In a sense, they give us a double treat cinematically, presenting crude vignettes of Bavarian rural kitsch and exploiting Rosalie's homesickness in almost vaudevillesque style. I contend that the interpretive weight of this sequence's kitschig details themselves exemplify camp. The sequence opens with the arrival of "Kindi," the Greenspace soldier son who is now on leave from his military base in Germany. Kindi arrives with a special treat for everyone; with much aplomb, he pops a video cassette into the family's shiny new video recorder. There is much excitement in the family ranks; from Herzi's enthusiastic squeals to April's gasps of incomprehension, the collective passion seizes us. The prelude to the video screening as a collective moment of expectation seduces us into identifying with the film's characters; in a sense, we too enter the cozy ambiance of the Greenspace family's television rumpus room. The video begins with the close-up of a sumptuously garnished hog's head, suggesting a culinary specialty of Bad Tölz (a town that, incidentally, was the location of an American army unit until recently). To heighten the visual delectability of this country feast, the camera slowly wanders over the dead animal's bright cherry eyes and apple-engorged mouth; as the angle widens, a hefty Hausfrau enters the scene carrying a mammoth tray of sloshing beer mugs. We join the entranced family in a lighthearted frolic through the Bavarian countryside. From ruddy-faced farmers in Lederhosen who play blaring measures of umpah music to convent girls in crisp organza caps who recite prayers in a open buggy, we are visually treated to the many wonders of rural Bavaria. These clichéd scenes of Old-World life lead to the violent depiction of a bobsled race; amidst the clatter of an enthusiastic audience, men fall off of their rickety wooden sleds, dodging bone crushing blades. The scene of the bucolic frolic is long and slow; in comparison, the short and fast bobsled episode assaults us. After the symbolic bloodbath on the slope, the video ends in an orgy of happy prosts and tankards of beer.

The coexistence of banality and violence: The delectable hog's head that leads to the massacre of the bobsled slope encapsulates the scope of Bavarian kitsch. Through the manipulation of the camera work, the film encodes these kitsch elements with serious consequences and this brief video clip portrays kitsch with a notion of history. Not only do the Bavarian rustics frolic in a devoted, serious way, they collapse the dangerous aspects of the competition with the drunken

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delirium of beer. This represents kitsch in its most dangerous form. And here is my next question: How does this dangerous, collapsing kitsch lead to camp? While the content of the video clip epitomizes the serious kitschig details of conservative Bavarian life, Rosalie's tearful reaction -- her heartfelt longing -- brings the Bad Tölz scene into the realm of camp. According to Thomas Elsaesser, "the protagonists ... dramatize themselves, often in an explicitly theatrical or operatic context" (169). Rosalie dramatizes herself in the poignant Bavarian sequence; while she has no role in her son's video, it surrounds her metaphorically. Her sloppy sentimentality attests to the importance of the events and it becomes clear to the spectator that Rosalie identifies with this banality. While the video's violent events incite a moment of sadistic pleasure, Rosalie's nostalgic tears compel us to identify with this displaced woman and her démodé world. By piquing our curiosity with German stereotypes, Adlon compels us to enter camp's terrain where at the very frontiers of kitsch the film reveals its ambiguous nature. This is a serious exposition of kitsch and as kitsch it indeed represents pure camp.

Where the dining room sequence introduces rationalized fraud and the Bavarian sequence dramatizes the seriousness of kitsch, the last sequence highlights questions of "illicit" consumption. With suspenseful music looming in the background, the sequence opens with a close-up shot of Rosalie, copiously perspiring at the wheel of her jumbo paneled van. Her appearance is in its most disheveled state and for this normally meticulous character the grotesqueries of sweat smudged make-up and grimy crumpled tent dress emphasize agitation. Careening down a country road, Rosalie's darting eyes focus on images at the sides of the van; she has the panic-ridden aura of a hunted animal. This nervous visual image sets the stage for the ultimate act in Rosalie's nefarious drama; in effect, Adlon emphasizes the severity of the situation by depicting their sly heroine in a state of physical and emotional turmoil. Rosalie's ultimate act again hinges on rationalized dishonesty. In this sequence, Rosalie's product of consumption is capital itself. Maximizing on her "lucky chance" of receiving a check with a blank amount column, Rosalie adroitly alters the amount of her husband's paycheck from $1,400.00 to $11,400.00. This act brings her debts current, avoiding foreclosure proceedings on her severely delinquent consumer loans. The causes for the Greenspaces' wealth of debts now impinges upon us. Through her wild expenditures, is Rosalie the gullible victim of the advertising and producing apparatus? Or, through chance forgery, is Rosalie a subversive entrepreneur whose business strategy consists of using the system against itself? Here, Rosalie merely applies her savvy to the daily tasks of running her credit-strapped family business in order to support the family's voracious appetite for goods and she makes the ironic business decision to steal from the bank to pay the bank. The camp moment in this section of the film surfaces between Rosalie's staged appearance and her clandestine act of consuming. Like the dining room's scandalous reinterpretation of Hollywoodiana and the exposition of kitsch as kitsch in the Bavarian sequence, the strange coincidence of a dramatic frame and banal act of forgery invites a camp reading and we can resolve this complex layering of melodrama and instrumentalized act of forgery only through the ambiguous sensibility of camp.

Through a brief discussion of three sequences in *Rosalie Goes Shopping*, I attempt to demonstrate the pervasive power of camp. Camp invites speculation as a theoretical field of inquiry and an aesthetic category because it always surfaces on peripheries. Camp is a past phenomenon which helped forge the shape of contemporary identity politics and art forms. Could it be possible that camp exists in and along other art forms and critical categories? Might the serious exposition of kitsch lead to other considerations? Is contemporary camp sensibility one of the liberating cultural subordinates the way Fredric Jameson proposes? These questions continue to defy straightforward answers. I believe that the ambiguous space of camp and its play with dense frames as well as the mise-en-question of totalized beauty clears the way for an understanding of art as everyday engagement. "I'm going multinational. Just think: Helping people beat the system worldwide": The prophetic last words of Rosalie best capture the consequences of an everyday tactics read through the sensibilities of camp. We are not left with an image of a megalomaniacal woman spreading the contagion of fraud worldwide. Rather, we are left with the possibility of

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everyday subversive play. Camp sensibility allows us to reappropriate cultural material, imaginatively opening new spaces for meaning.

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