

## Camp/camp: the collision of style and biopolitics

“The more we study art, the less we care for nature.” Oscar Wilde

The Department of Comparative Literature, Hispanic Studies, and The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at Western University invite abstracts for the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual Graduate Student Conference on “Camp/camp,” which will be taking place March 26-28, 2020.

The ambiguous nature of ‘camp’ means that it summons different meanings dependent on one’s frame of reference. Camp as sensibility is described by Susan Sontag as using artifice and exaggeration to “convert the serious into the frivolous—these are grave matters” (1). A grave matter, indeed, when we consider the implications of covering over matters of biopolitics and totalitarianism with the study of aesthetics. Thus, to contrast the study of camp with the study of the camp, as exemplified by the work of Giorgio Agamben, is to reveal the intimate relationship between aesthetics and biopolitics. Following Agamben, we contend that the body is reduced to ‘bare life’ in the camp, “the space that is opened up when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (Agamben 168). Today, camp as sensibility and camp as the biopolitical are both ingrained in our current cultural moment as an aesthetics of distraction: we watch the MET Gala, binge *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and *Queer Eye*, and obsess over Lady Gaga and Barbra Streisand; at the same time children are locked in cages by ICE, we debate the refugee crisis, and conflict continues in places like Hong Kong, Catalonia, and the Middle East, as captured by Marjane Satrapi’s graphic autobiography, *Persepolis* (2000).

Although a definition of camp as an aesthetic mode often seems elusive, it is something which is found almost everywhere in our contemporary culture. Moreover, the contrast of the camp as a philosophical concept widens the scope of the culture of camp and brings together the intersection of the serious with the frivolous in ways that expose the binary. Camp exposes the dichotomies of art/kitsch and natural/artifice. This can take the form of examining literature, such as the carnivalesque-grotesque in Medieval, Early Modern, and Enlightenment literatures, for example Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* which makes use of scatological imagery in relation to the body politic. Many genres of literature employ biopolitical elements, especially science fiction, horror, speculative fiction, and trauma literature. In fact, Holocaust literature has itself become its own category, ranging from autobiographical works, such as Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man* (1947), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus I & II* (1980), and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), to novels like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006).

Indigenous Canadian art and literature often combine these concepts with the biopolitical, such as in the art and performance of Cree artist Kent Monkman and his alter-ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, whose work juxtaposes trauma with queer aesthetic performances interrupting idyllic vistas of Canada. The contrast between kitsch and camp also emerges in the literary works of Indigenous authors such as Sherman Alexie, Thomas King, Tomson Highway, and Joshua Whitehead, whose novels and poetry impress on the reader the importance of rebelling against the colonial body politic. On the other hand, distinct Canadian landmarks have also been tainted by a camp sensibility, as seen in Henry Hathaway’s *Niagara* (1953) starring Marilyn Monroe.

Camp is also sensed through the work of many filmmakers, such as in Pedro Almodóvar's signature style, where camp meets high art and has been popular from the 1960s through to the present. Other Hollywood films and Broadway productions have long embraced camp sensibility in many classic films such as *Barbarella* (1968), *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Billy Elliot* (2000). Many of these classics also embrace the tyrannical nature of biopolitics that deal with issues in sexuality, disease, abortion, mental illness, and drug use.

We look to bridge an abundance of disconnections between culture and politics through conversations on the polysemic nature of camp. We invite papers in all fields of the Arts & Humanities, which include, but not limited to Comparative Literature, Hispanic Studies, Theory & Criticism, Philosophy, Women's Studies and Feminist Research, Queer Studies, Film Studies, Geography, Theology, Media Studies, Theatre Studies, History, Indigenous Studies, Music, Classical Studies, Visual Arts, and Postcolonial Studies.

Possible topics:

- Biopolitics (the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Robert Esposito, etc.)
- Colonialism/post-colonialism (trauma, reconciliation, notions of identity)
- Migration and mobility (politics, ethical issues, the lived reality of being a refugee)
- Aesthetics (camp, kitsch), WJT Mitchell's pictures, Jeff Koons' installations
- Literature (genres such as horror, erotica, pulp fiction, romance novels, etc.)
- Telenovelas (Thalía; *María, la del barrio*; *Betty, la fea*, and American satires *Ugly Betty* and *Jane the Virgin*)
- Geography ('land back' movement, Canadian reservation system, geopolitics of the North)
- Decadence
- Camp Icons (Bette Davis, Judy Garland, Tallulah Bankhead, Eartha Kitt, Cher, etc.)
- Queer Studies: *RuPaul's Drag Race* and homonationalism, drag queen storytelling
- Feminist studies (feminist embodiment, drag-kings, butch-femme aesthetic)
- Girl power and camp (*Wonder Woman*, Spice Girls, *Glow*)
- Camp and capitalism
- Phenomenology of Camp through queer aesthetic experiences/performances/artworks.
- Black Camp (*Paris is Burning*, Michael Jackson, and Prince)

- Indigenous Camp (Kent Monkman, Adrian Stimson, Sherman Alexie, Joshua Whitehead)
- Education and teaching pedagogy
- Pantomime
- Children's television and Camp
- Canadian and/or American Politics e.g., "Sassy Trump," the Cold War and its aftermaths
- Apocalyptic literature/creation stories, dystopian narratives
- Directional nature of camp – revealing or concealing
- Cult films – examples – *Addams Family*, *Hocus Pocus*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *Showgirls*
- Film/theatre adaptations – examples – *Billy Elliot*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Cabaret*
- Auteur Cinema and Camp (Quentin Tarantino, Pedro Almodóvar, Rainer Werner Fassbinder)
- Eurovision: camp and nationalism
- Dandyism
- Camp and "the awful"
- Nostalgia in popular culture (comic books, television, movies: *Flash Gordon*, *Masters of the Universe*, *Batman*, etc.)
- Video games and camp (adaptations, superheroes and supervillains, etc.)

Formal papers should be designed to be delivered in not more than 20 minutes. Please send ~300 word abstracts, along with a 50 word biography, to **gradconference2020@gmail.com** by **January 7, 2020**. The abstracts should also include the following information: Presenter's short biography (50 words), affiliation (Department and University), a presentation title, and an indication of any special media or other requirements.

Conference queries should be sent to [gradconference2020@gmail.com](mailto:gradconference2020@gmail.com). Please also visit [gradconference2020.home.blog](http://gradconference2020.home.blog) for more information and updates, or follow us on twitter [@camp\\_uwo](https://twitter.com/camp_uwo)