



Notes on Camp

Susan Sontag

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'The ultimate Camp statement: it's good because it's awful.'

These two classic essays were the first works of criticism to break down the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture, and made Susan Sontag a literary sensation.

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Notes on Camp Details

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Anne says

I loved it!

Anyone who is even remotely interested in modern culture should read these two essays. I don't think I have ever read any text this short which was this jam-packed with meaning: Sontag was extremely insightful.

sevdah says

Read both of those before, but more than two years ago so a reread was underway. Notes on Camp was very good, but the second essay in this little book - One Culture and the New Sensibility - was so good when I finished it I just started it over again.

ALLEN says

At this remove, the late critic/author Susan Sontag is probably best remembered for ILLNESS AS METAPHOR and AIDS AND ITS METAPHORS. However, this little essay had already put her on the map back in the Sixties, when it first appeared in book form as one chapter of AGAINST INTERPRETATION. Here's an inexpensive way to get Sontag's low-down on the emerging phenomenon known as "Camp," and why its artifacts can be viewed sympathetically, ironically, or dismissively. Since today's world is full of Camp, as witness the re-released Volkswagen Beetle, Elvira the bad-movie mocking queen, and Bruce Vilanch's t-shirts, it's great fun to check out "the source," Susan Sontag. The interested may also wish to ponder her **SPOILER** closing statement, that the modern world is shaped by Jewish moral earnestness and homosexual irony and playfulness.

Hizatul Akmah says

actual rating: 3.5/5

mwpm says

Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described. One of these is the sensibility -- unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it -- that goes by the cult name of "Camp."

A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about; but there are special reasons

why Camp, in particular, has never been discussed. It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric -- something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques. Apart from a lazy two-page sketch in Christopher Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening* (1954), it has hardly broken into print. To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it. If the betrayal can be defended, it will be for the edification it provides, or the dignity of the conflict it resolves. For myself, I plead the goal of self-edification, and the goad of a sharp conflict in my own 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.

Though I am speaking about sensibility only -- and about a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous -- these are grave matters. Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They allow that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And even worse. To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free -- as opposed to rote -- human response. Nothing is more decisive. There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion - and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas. (One of the facts to be reckoned with is that taste tends to develop very unevenly. It's rare that the same person has good visual taste and good taste in people and taste in ideas.)

Taste has no system and no proofs. But there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste. A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea . . .

To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful,¹ one must be tentative and nimble. The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility. It's embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp. One runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp.

These notes are for Oscar Wilde.

"One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art."

- *Phrases & Philosophies for the Use of the Young*

1. To start very generally: Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.
2. To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized -- or at least apolitical.
3. 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, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings. . . . 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.

Read the full text here: <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html>

andie says

"camp sees everything in quotation marks. it's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman'. to perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand being-as-playing-a-role. it is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater."

"the exploration of the impersonal (and transpersonal) in contemporary art is the new classicism; at least, a reaction against what is understood as the romantic spirit dominates most of the interesting art of today. today's art, with its insistence on coolness, its refusal of what it considers to be sentimentality, its spirit of exactness, its sense of 'research' and 'problems', is closer to the spirit of science than of art in the old-fashioned sense. often, the artist's work is only his idea, his concept."

wig!

Dane Cobain says

Yeah, I didn't really 'get' this one. It was just a bunch of pretentious essays that left a sour taste in my mouth. It was mostly nonsense, and when it wasn't nonsense, I totally disagreed with it.

Peter says

The essay on camp was a delightful read on what the style and meanings are. Plenty of references are there to broaden ones knowledge of this fascinating subject. A great read but far too short.

The second piece stirred very little in me at all, but none the less I think more of her work will be added to the list.

Reuben Woolley says

A MESS of an essay - stuffed with value judgements, hazy, and defining something even vaguer than what Sontag claims the purpose of the notes are- I love it with all my heart

Mark Joyce says

Completely arbitrary, inconsistent, extravagant and a bit silly. Camp, in other words. I rather enjoyed it.

Alicia says

"What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures. (...) Camp is a tender feeling."

Tam Sothonprapakonn says

Notes on Camp - 4/5

How Sontag could have thought that Camp is "depoliticized/apolitical" is honestly beyond me.

One Culture and the New Sensibility - 5/5

One of the most brilliant essays I've ever read in my life, to be honest. A cultural landmark.

Shaghayegh.l3 says

James says

"Sensations, feelings, the abstract forms and styles of sensibility count. It is to these that contemporary art addresses itself. The basic unit for contemporary art is not the idea, but the analysis of and extension of sensations." - One Culture and the New Sensibility

Matteo Fumagalli says

IL POTERE DELL'AMARE COSE BRUTTE.

Gioiellino assoluto.

Questo libricino da non perdere, che si legge nell'arco di un viaggio in treno e costa solo una sterlina contiene due bellissimi saggi di Susan Sontag che, qui, riflette sul "brutto che piace".

Il primo essay "Notes on camp" è un'illuminante riflessione sull'estetica camp e sul piacere dell'amare certi prodotti artistici che sono esagerati, pacchiani e brutti, ma carichi di un'anima sovversiva e portatori di una nuova sensibilità artistica.

Il secondo riflette sull'inutile lotta tra approccio scientifico e approccio artistico, tra cultura alta e cultura bassa e sul potere dell'arte di essere anche violenta e uncomfortable. Poche pagine che distruggono l'idea di divisione tra ciò che è avant-garde e ciò che è trash. D'altronde, è ipocrita il pittore colto di minimal art che è in grado di amare l'ultimo successo dell'estate? No, è semplicemente una persona che è stata in grado di avere un'ampia apertura sul mondo e un modo artistico di vivere la vita che abbatte le barriere dettate da una società sempre meno comunicante e sempre più snob.

