

## Camp, the theme of this year's Met Gala, is almost impossible to define. Here's our best effort.

Camp, explained in five examples, from Oscar Wilde to Donald Trump.

By Constance Grady | @constancegrady | May 3, 2019, 8:00am EDT



Lady Gaga, arriving at the 2019 Met Gala, did her camp homework. | Photo by Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for The Met Museum/Vogue

At this year's Met Gala on May 6, the theme is camp. But not camp like tents and sleeping bags. Every year, the Gala is themed to the show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, and in 2019, the Costume Institute is putting on "Camp: Notes on Fashion," looking at camp the aesthetic sensibility. This new theme can only mean one thing: Dozens of the most famous celebrities of the world are going to be asked to explain what they think "camp" means on the red carpet, and they will all fail.

I don't mean that there aren't smart celebrities. I mean that camp is nearly impossible to talk about. The seminal essay explaining camp — Susan Sontag's "**Notes on Camp**" — isn't even a full essay. It's just notes! If Susan Sontag can't turn camp into a coherent essay, who among us can?

And since Sontag wrote her notes in 1964, camp has gotten even more difficult to talk about. In 1964, camp was a curiosity, but in 2019, it's one of the dominant sensibilities of

the era. It's everywhere, and its ubiquity seems to render it curiously invisible.

“Sontag in her essay said not everything is camp, but since I have been working on the show, I have started to think it is everywhere, and that all fashion is on some level camp,” **Andrew Bolton, curator of the Met's Costume Institute, told the New York Times in October.** “It has gained such currency it has become invisible, and part of my goal is to make it visible again.”

To try to get a grasp on camp, I've turned to a series of examples in our culture that show different aspects of the sensibility. Together, we will get a handle on what camp is (and isn't), which means we will be better able to judge celebrity red-carpet interviews from the comfort of our own couches. Here is camp, explained in five examples.

### **Classic camp: Oscar Wilde**



A statue of Oscar Wilde by Danny Osborne in Merrion Square, Dublin. | Wikimedia Commons/Arbol01

Sontag dedicated “Notes on Camp” to Oscar Wilde, the 19th-century poet and playwright who wrote ***The Importance of Being Earnest***, and she sprinkles the essay with some of Wilde’s famous epigrams. That’s because Wilde’s life and aesthetic more or less defined the sensibility. If you are trying to decide whether something is camp, a solid litmus test is to ask yourself, “Would Oscar Wilde react to this with delight, delighted contempt, or only pure contempt?” If it’s one of the first two, you’re golden.

What makes Wilde camp, or perhaps more properly, a connoisseur of camp, is that he processed nearly everything on the level of aesthetics — and all aesthetics are based in artifice. Sontag mirrors this, paraphrasing Mrs. Cheveley’s lament from *An Ideal Husband* that “to be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up,” and quoting Wilde’s admonition from *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*: “One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.” She might just as well have quoted Wilde’s opening phrase from the same tract: “The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered.”

For Wilde, style was paramount, and style is created, hence artificial. Style is to be celebrated for the labor that goes into creating it and for the pleasure that it creates; style that effaces itself in the name of naturalism is dull, more trouble than it’s worth.

Wilde’s delight in artifice was only heightened when the artifice is accidental, when it was created by what Sontag calls “a seriousness that fails.” Famously, he quipped of one of Charles Dickens’s most sentimental and pathetic child deaths that “one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.”

Little Nell’s death in *The Old Curiosity Shop* was considered by Wilde to be a camp masterpiece precisely because it is not meant to be funny. It was written with the earnest expectation that its reader would fall into wild sobs upon reading it. (Which, incidentally, **many readers did**.) It insists upon its tragedy, repeating the mournful line “she was dead” over and over again, too much to be genuinely tragic — which is what makes it perfectly camp: “Camp,” as Sontag writes, “is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much.’”

The fact that Wilde recognized Little Nell’s death as camp is what makes him, himself, a camp icon. Camp is both an aesthetic mode, inherent to a piece of art, and a sensibility, inherent to the way we interpret a piece of art. Wilde united both aspects.

Wilde lived his life in recognition and celebration of style and artifice above all else: His aesthetic was camp, his sensibility was camp, and he sought out the camp hiding in the rest of the world.

Wilde’s status as an icon also points to another crucial element of camp. In its playfulness and its love of artifice and theatricality, camp as a sensibility is consistently associated with queerness.

For Sontag, camp's queerness is a curious side issue, one that she acknowledges but feels is not particularly central to the sensibility: "One feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp," she writes, "someone else would."

But her treatment of camp's queerness is the part of her essay that has aged the most poorly, particularly her belief that camp is "disengaged, depoliticized — or at least apolitical." For today's critics, camp was inherently queer when Sontag was writing.


"It was developed as a secret language in order to identify oneself to like-minded or similarly closeted homosexuals, a shorthand of arcane and coded, almost kabbalistic references and practices developed in order to operate safely apart and without fear of detection from a conservative and conventional world that could be aggressively hostile towards homosexuals, particularly effeminate males and masculine females," **writes the artist and filmmaker Bruce LaBruce**. But, he adds, camp has since gone mainstream.

"In the contemporary world, in which gays have largely assimilated into the dominant order, such signifying practices have become somewhat obsolete," **LaBruce says**, "and the previous forms of camping and camp identification have long since been emptied of camp or gay significance, rendering them easily co-opted, commercialized, and trivialized."

### **Camp in fashion: Gucci**







The exaggeration and artifice of this aesthetic is what makes it camp. Gucci autumn winter 2018 fashion show during Milan Fashion Week. | Catwalking/Getty Images

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“I hate Gucci,” said Francis.

“Do you?” said Henry, glancing up from his reverie. “Really? I think it’s rather grand.”

“Come on, Henry.”

“Well, it’s so expensive, but it’s so ugly too, isn’t it? I think they make it ugly on purpose. And yet people buy it out of sheer perversity.”

“I don’t see what you think is grand about that.”

“Anything is grand if it’s done on a large enough scale,” said Henry.

—Donna Tartt, ***The Secret History***

Gucci is sponsoring this year’s Met Gala, and if you’ve ever seen its collections, you get why: Of all our major fashion houses, Gucci is one of the most consistently committed to camp. That’s saying something, because runway fashion, with its heightened aesthetics and commitment to the spectacle of artificiality over naturalism, is in some ways inherently camp — but Gucci takes it to a new level.

Gucci, **the author and self-proclaimed “Gucci addict” Buzz Bissinger once wrote**, is heightened beyond anything else. It is “rocker, edgy, tight, bad boy, hip, stylish, flamboyant, unafraid, raging against the conformity that submerges us into boredom and blandness and the sexless saggy sackcloths that most men walk around in like zombies without the cinematic excitement of engorging flesh.”

Gucci’s aesthetic is one of flamboyance that reaches the edge of intentional vulgarity. People outside of the fashion world may balk at it, but the point of Gucci isn’t to be pretty or flattering or in good taste. It’s to do the opposite, willfully, and make it fashion.

Likewise, camp has no interest in traditional ideas of beauty or good taste. It wants exuberant fakery. It wants spectacle. It wants to explode boundaries.



A model walks the runway at the Gucci show during Milan Fashion Week on February 20, 2019. | Vittorio Zunino Celotto/Getty Images for Gucci

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In fashion, the kind of camp Gucci does becomes a bit of a flex: if you are some combination of rich enough and conventionally hot enough with a good enough eye, when you do vulgarity intentionally and mix it just enough with high art, then it becomes intentional camp and is thus hip. If you can't pull it off, then it's just vulgar.

Gucci's camp is **gold leather sneakers with mismatching, three-inch rainbow rubber platforms**, running for \$890 a pair. (**Very Marie Antoinette**, according to the Guardian.) It's **power-clashing patterns** with giant hats and trompe-l'oeil bows. **It's models stalking down the runways carrying replicas of their own heads**. It's excess and artificiality to the point of joyful, absurd parody.

### **Camp vs. campiness: *Glee***

Sontag draws a line between true camp and the lesser category of what she calls "camping," or what we now call "campy." What distinguishes the two, she says, is "the delicate relation between parody and self-parody in Camp." True camp is playful and affectionate in its parody, and it loves itself even as it parodies itself. Campiness is riddled with self-loathing.

Because of that self-loathing, things that are campy are arch and ironic about their campiness. What's more, because they see no higher aesthetic value in the thing they are parodying, they can't imagine having any aesthetic purpose for themselves higher than

being “fun.” True camp, in contrast, loves itself enough to aspire toward being great, even sublime. For Sontag, that’s why ***The Goon Show*** is camp, while some of Hitchcock’s films — like *To Catch a Thief*, which Sontag reads as both a parody of romantic comedies and as self-parody — are merely campy.

It’s a tricky, slippery distinction, and when I tried to parse it out for myself, the example I kept getting stuck on was ***Glee***.

*Glee* was Ryan Murphy’s musical teen soap, running from 2009 to 2015, and it’s a perfect illustration of the camp versus campiness distinction because you can make a solid argument for it constituting either one. *Glee* has a knowingness to it that feels small and campy to me: all those winks at the camera, the overwhelming sense of smarm. But *Glee* at both its best (“**Don’t Stop Believing**” in the pilot) and its worst (the **school shooting episode**, anyone?) also has a level of ambition and self-love that transcends campiness and head toward the realm of pure camp.

*Glee* was a show that at least occasionally tried to be something meaningful, not just fun. If it succeeded with enough grandeur, it might rise to the level of intentional camp. If it failed sublimely enough, it might become unintentional camp. But when it wasn’t trying, was it just campy?

To help figure out where *Glee* fell, I turned to Vox critic-at-large and originator of the **Theory of the Three Glee’s** Todd VanDerWerff. Take it away, VDW: “*Glee* was meant to be intentional camp, then failed at being that, became campy, but then failed at *that* and, thus, became camp!”

So there you go, then!

### **Straight camp: Nicholas Sparks**

“But wait!” you cry. “Go back! We started this whole conversation by talking about how camp is queer. How is Nicholas Sparks — the author and filmmaker whose work defines the genre of ‘**Straight White People Almost Kissing**’ — how is *Nicholas Sparks* camp?”

Hear me out. Camp has been historically associated with queerness, but some critics have suggested that association stems from a desire to treat everything queer as the other. **As Billy McEntee and Cam Cronin wrote for the Observer**, “While straight people delight in over-the-top aesthetics too, they may not have categorized this pleasure because camp



has, historically, grounded queer culture and bridged its isolated communities. Straight people haven't had a similar *need* for camp."

Camp is characterized by gleeful excess and artificiality, and what is more excessive or artificial than Nicholas Sparks's universe of beautiful straight white people in love but kept apart by their class differences/fatal illnesses/wars/etc.? Sparks's works insist so strongly on their heterosexuality as to burlesque straightness.

Think of Allie and Noah in *The Notebook*, feeling their feelings more strongly than anyone in the world has ever felt their feelings before, kissing passionately in the rain and then dying in each other's arms in the same bed: The emotions are so high that they parody themselves with utmost sincerity and utmost self-love, and in this way they become camp, just as the death of Little Nell is camp.

### **Political camp: Donald Trump**



Donald Trump during a ribbon-cutting event at Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, New Jersey. | Tom Briglia/FilmMagic

**The aesthetics of Trumpism** are camp in its lowest sense. They are pointedly artificial, emphasizing stylization over all else: the swirl of ersatz hair, the spray tan, the endless, endless gold. If Gucci builds intentional camp by combining vulgarity with high art, Trump builds unintentional camp by combining vulgarity with hard power. Camp is, perhaps, the

natural aesthetic mode of a political figure who demands to be taken seriously rather than literally.

Trump has taken camp out of the realm of aesthetics and brought it into politics, in the process rendering camp's playfulness and transgression into reckless cruelty. Camp has a tendency toward a sense that everything is ridiculous and so nothing matters, and in art, that nihilism is fun. But when camp enters into politics, that nihilism becomes dangerous. It starts to treat real human beings and their concerns as ridiculous nonsense that does not really matter.

It's ultimately because of Trump that "Camp: Notes on Fashion" feels like such a timely theme for this year's Met Gala, which puts the intersection of fashion and culture at large on parade. "Trump is a very camp figure," **Bolton, the Met curator, told the New York Times**. "Camp: Notes on Fashion" promises to examine what makes camp so compelling, and hence what makes it so valuable in art — and so dangerous in politics.

