

QUEER BEDFELLOWS: COCTEAU, GENET, FASSBINDER, AND THE ART OF  
CAMP

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article considers camp and the ways it manifests in the films of Jean Cocteau, Jean Genet, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. It focuses on the use of camp as one form of queer expression in film. The article argues that the camp that arises in these films orients a new reading of them through a queer lens and expresses the personal, social, and political views of the directors who created them. It uncovers that Cocteau's camp manifests as visual love letters to his starring actor as well as a commentary upon the state of the homosexual in society; that Genet's camp considers homoeroticism and its place within same-sex romance; and Fassbinder's camp embraces the idea of angst and melancholy as an essential part of queer existence. Ultimately, this article attempts to establish a new definition of camp that focuses upon the purposes it can serve as a form of queer expression.

## I. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS CAMP?

In this thesis, I will examine the role of camp in the films of Jean Cocteau, Jean Genêt, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. What is camp, however? Susan Sontag, the scholar who is widely recognized as the person who has set the standard definition of camp, said that to try to define camp is to betray its very nature (Sontag 1); this stance misinterprets the nature of camp. Camp is an attitude that defiantly expresses a sense of taste that twists societal norms; it is a state of being that inherently wants to be recognized. There is a “double-think” in the camp psyche in the sense that it both wants to be part of culture and go against it at the same time. Often, camp includes the appropriation of an object that would be considered part of the norm and twisting its characteristics in a way that holds a mirror to society and allows it to reflect upon itself in a satirical, comedic light. The nature of camp is to create a sense of awareness in the viewer; a hyperbolic distortion of otherwise common aesthetics serves as critique. Therefore, as a vehicle of societal self-reflection, camp serves an important, distinct role as a means of expression.

The directors that will be analyzed in this thesis express camp in differing ways. Camp manifests in Cocteau’s films as the underlying sensibility that brings forth exquisite images in terms of sets, costumery, and the blocking of actors in order to further what I refer to as the “queer aesthetic.” Genet used it as a means of expressing homosexual eroticism in order to subvert heteronormative ideals of sexuality. Rainer Werner Fassbinder uses camp as a vehicle for confronting society’s hypocrisies, shortcomings, and biases in order to show a mirror to the German viewers in the post-World-War II era.

Of course, they are not the only queer directors who have produced works that fall

in the realm of camp; however, they will serve as examples for the purposes of this thesis. Each of the three represents a different type of issue that queer camp films address: the artistic, the social, and the political. While all three have aspects of all of these topics in the films that I will analyze in this thesis, each has a different emphasis on one more than the others.

The first time that the word “camp” was used in the sense being described in this thesis was in Molière’s play, *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, in 1671 (Dansky 15). During one scene in the play, a character describes a maneuver: “Stick your hat on at an angle and look disreputable. Plant yourself on one leg. [Campe-toi sur un pied.] Put your hand on your hip. Strut like a comedy-king!” The connotation behind the order to “campe-toi sur un pied” was for the actor to pose in a boldly over-the-top fashion.

Camp usually deals with aesthetics as it is an idea that centers on appearances, specifically those of artifice. It is the emphasis of style over substance and the exaggeration of the essence of an object taken to the umpteenth degree. No object is inherently camp – how it is used, altered, worn, or depicted is what makes it camp. For example, a feather dress, no matter how fabulous, is not camp on its own. However, if a drag queen were to strut dramatically into a chandelier-filled ballroom whilst the orchestra crescendos theatrically, that would be camp. While it tends to lurk in the realm of the visual, there are many examples of non-visual creations being camp, such as music.

According to previous definitions of camp, notably the one first offered by Susan Sontag, it can be intentional or unintentional (Sontag 6); this definition is misguided. Camp, as a practice of being both inside and outside of culture, cannot be unintentional.

Of course, not every creator intends a creation to be outright camp; appropriators may transform them into camp objects. It is the camp lens that makes something camp. A poignant example of camp would be John Waters' film *Pink Flamingos* (1972), in which he purposefully used camp as an aesthetic and storytelling device via the dialogue and actions of the characters, most particularly the character played by the legendary drag queen Divine. Of course, Waters intended for the film to be camp. On the opposite end of the spectrum, we have works such as the 80s horror film *Evil Dead II* (1987), one amongst many horror films of old that has transitioned from the realm of terror to that of camp as time passed and special effects greatly improved. Films such as this were intended to be taken seriously, but failed to do so, therefore leading the camp practitioners to adopt it as their own. There are many examples such as this because when a film is serious on paper, but is not serious when translated onto the screen, it wanders into the camp realm of duality. To be deemed a "bad movie" is to exist both inside and outside of society. Films occupy an important place in modern culture; when a film does not live up to the particular standards that are placed upon it by the consumer, it is thrust into the grey in-betweenness that is the world of camp.

Camp plays with societal roles; Sontag is correct in calling it the world of effeminate men and masculine women, a world of exaggerated gender and of no gender (Sontag 4). The homosexuals of yesteryear would do what they called "camping," in which they would imitate the adornments and mannerisms of the heterosexual to such an exaggerated degree that the behavior became parodic. Camp is also the realm of drag queens and drag kings, who impersonate the opposite gender in the most ostentatious and hyperbolic way.

Sontag also said that camp is apolitical (Sontag 10, 13); this is also incorrect (LaBruce). To be camp is to be an “other;” it is a state of being in which something is inherently abnormal when compared to what is considered the status quo. Queerness lends itself to a camp aesthetic. In fact, to be camp is to be queer. Of course, this doesn’t mean cisgender people and/or heterosexuals can’t be camp; however, it requires intentionality on their part. The purveyors of the camp sensibility have tended to be queer people, from the dandies of the 18th and 19th centuries to today. To be queer is to exist both inside and outside of society; a queer person participates in society on a basic level, but is considered to be an “other” at the same time. If camp is the grey area in the borderlands of societal norms, then what better example could be made to demonstrate that other than a queer person? Furthermore, the act of reversing long-held societal roles is inherently progressive and deliberately subverts conservative norms of life. Camp is a reversal of societal roles, and to be queer is to reverse societal roles. To be queer is to be camp. The act of reversing societal roles is a political act. Therefore, the act of being queer and “out” is both camp and political.

A queer person attempting to not be camp and blend in with heterosexual society is actually the campiest of them all, because their attempt to impersonate heteronormativity – to, in essence, place artifice in a higher position than substance – tends to be an exaggerated, overcompensating version of what they strive to replicate. They are, in the most literal sense of the word, camping. This type of person is not hard to find in the world; many gay men in particular have stories of other gay men who remain staunchly in the closet and attempt to create a heterosexual façade by acting and dressing “straighter” than most actual heterosexuals. Of course, this is a survival tactic

that ought not to be looked down upon, and it acts as a critique of society in itself. It leads one to wonder what sort of society pressures people to go against their very nature in such an extreme way. Despite its focus on all that is artifice and façade, camp has a way of revealing truth; in this case, camp acts as a mirror.

It is not a coincidence that all of the directors whose works I examine in this thesis are queer. When a film is produced with the eye of a queer director, there are clear aesthetic differences between what they produce and what their heterosexual peers produce – and the difference, more often than not, is the presence of camp.

It is the goal of this thesis to analyze the ways in which camp acts as a vehicle by which these directors either intentionally or unintentionally expressed their status as queer artists; only then might it be possible to adequately appreciate their films.

## II. JEAN COCTEAU: POETRY FOR THE EYE

Jean Cocteau, as a poet and a filmmaker, was a master of aesthetics. Every frame seems almost like an oil painting, with composition and subjects considered with the skillful eye of a true auteur. Many of his films, particularly the ones that are selected to be analyzed for this thesis, are poetic in their own right. This focus upon the visual artifice and hyperbolic movement of his subjects is the vehicle by which camp rears its head in these Cocteau films. In this way, camp is used as a means of expressing the artistic viewpoint of Cocteau in regards to the realm of the visual. Because of this, Cocteau's camp is the least political of the three directors; while he was indeed furthering the queer aesthetic, there is less of the intentionality that can be found with Genet and particularly Fassbinder.

A primary aspect of these films that makes them camp is the fact that they all star Cocteau's lover, Jean Marais. It is made clear that Marais was adored by the camera, with the angles and lighting always illuminating his chiseled visage as if the films themselves were love letters from Cocteau to Marais. With their romance in mind, the camp lens is easy to fall into. These visual love letters were made with the hyperbolic passion of a man who was madly infatuated; it therefore follows that they would be as over-the-top as possible and depict the subject of his passion in the most loving and appealing way he knew how.

Cocteau's perspective as a gay man comes forth through the acting and dialogue, as well. There are many instances in which gender roles are reversed, with male and female characters often acting in ways that differ from what was typical at the time in the world of film: sexualized, feminine men interact with reasonable, masculine women.

In his film *Orphée*, camp is seen through the costumes, blocking, and lighting. Marais, playing Orpheus, serves as a sexual object for the camera – the light happens to hit him perfectly, his hair is often coiffed, and his attire is sexualized. Orpheus, in the case of this film, serves as the camera's Adonis. The other male characters are also sexual objects, with Death's minions wearing costumes fit for a gay magazine pinup photo. Orpheus, and the other men in the film, are depicted as being selfish, vapid creatures who are motivated by emotion rather than the cold efficiency of the women. The women's clothes reflect this fact as well, being in tailored and tasteful elegance; it is quite apparent that the women are not the objects of desire. The reversal of roles in this way serves as a form of camp; society is used to men and women being treated the opposite way in other films, with women being sexualized and men appearing strong and domineering. This choice in costumery could lead an audience member to think more critically of the gender roles they play themselves in their life, and is a question that contemporary society is still considering. Clothes serve an important function in society; they demonstrate one's gender expression, culture, religion, politics, and creative point-of-view. This is a fact that queer people know more than most. How one chooses to express oneself through clothes and makeup could determine whether one could be recognized as being queer, which is something that one may or may not want to do. As a queer person himself, it therefore follows that Cocteau would be cognizant of how the costumes his actors wore may come across; and it seems as if he erred towards gay aesthetic preferences in his costume choices for this film.

Another important visual aspect of *Orphée* was the choices in set design. There were many instances of hidden visual gags that would only be picked up if one were to

allow one's eyes to wander around the screen when the focus of action was elsewhere. There were multiple appearances of comic caricatures adorning the walls, depicting political cartoons and other visually comedic media. In addition, the scenes in which Orpheus is wandering through the afterlife depict a grand decrepit ruin with mist and eerie lighting that one would perhaps see at a contemporary Halloween haunted house, when paired with the exaggerated slow-motion movements of the actors, come across as being campy. These scenes reference the subjective camera of 1920s Impressionist filmmaking, a period during which Cocteau made his first film. The atmosphere of the Underworld in this case is meant to convey the internal emotional state of Orpheus. However, with that in mind, there is an undeniable air of camp in the "underworld" scenes that is produced only through the combination of the mise-en-scène, overdramatic acting, homoerotic costumery, and use of slow/reverse motion that Cocteau was able to create.

In his film *La Belle et la bête*, Cocteau establishes the film's status as camp from the very beginning by showing the clapperboard that begins the first scene. This act brings the viewer out of the immersion in the story to come and brings forth the sense of omniscience typically used in fairy tales such as this story. The effect that this state of mind has on the viewing of the film is that the viewer is led to view with a more removed sensibility, which later acts as the vehicle for which the campiness of the film may be furthered more than if it were not in such a state.

In a similar way to the costumes in *Orphée*, the men's attire intends to be more practical and revealing, with many a plunging neckline. On the other end, the women's attire differs between characters. In the beginning of the film, Belle wears clothing that is

modest and tasteful, yet reflective of her diminished social status. As the film progresses, Belle's clothing becomes more ornate in order to match the Beast's attire. These costumes reflect the general behavior of the genders, in which the men are presented as either bumbling or primal, and the women are depicted as either vain or innocent, yet always more intelligent than the men. At one point, Avenant even flips his hair as if he were a female popstar. In contrast, Belle's sisters are quick to mock the silliness of the men, their perspectives being more sensible than that of Avenant and Ludovic, who think it would be a wise idea to try to kill the Beast who is far stronger than they.

Much of the direction given to the actors can be considered camp as well; an example of this would be the scene in which Belle, upon entering the castle for the first time, dramatically runs in slow motion through the main foyer whilst the disembodied arms stretch out the candelabras that immediately light. She then continues through the castle in the same manner, lifting her dress so she may run in the most overstated way possible while the rooms themselves seem to animate with her presence; the curtains on the windows flow elegantly in the breeze to greet her as she seems to float through a hallway as if her feet are not even touching the ground. She is met by the door to her room, which verbally invites her to enter, and it glides open to reveal a baroque chamber reminiscent of the era in which camp was invented and Versailles was the center of the French world. This scene creates a dramatic image that is so hyperbolic as to enter the realm of camp. The acting in this case goes so beyond what is needed for the scene that it could be nothing more than intentional hyper-drama. In contrast, this kind of scene does not take place in the "real world" beyond the Beast's domain; this juxtaposition is a way of demonstrating differences in how time operates in the two realms. While the Beast's

realm exists in a sort of suspended “fairy tale” temporality, the real world exists in realistic time.

The focus on Marais is quite apparent throughout the film; in the scene in which Belle’s father is discussing the fact that he will be leaving the next day to meet his ship at the port, the camera zooms forward in such a way as to block Belle’s father behind a candlestick, leaving only Belle and Avenant, played by Marais, in full view. In this way, Marais is clearly shown to be an important subject to the camera, and it establishes the two characters’ relationship, with the figure of the candle literally splitting them up. In addition, the fact that Marais plays both male leads – Avenant and the Beast – shows Cocteau’s clear favoritism towards him. Even though Belle is supposed to be the main co-character, the two characters played by Marais are treated by the camera as if they are more important. This is because they *are* more important to Cocteau; Marais is, after all, his lover.

In regards to set design, the “fairy tale” aspect of the film makes the sets fall under the umbrella of camp. The looming castle surrounded by mist with a rainstorm above; disembodied arms holding candelabras; grand stone archways and elegant gardens; all of these lend themselves to the castle standing as a symbol of the camp of decay. Decay, in this world, is elegant; the castle is a place of magic and power ruled over by a nobleman-turned-beast. It is a place that is the dwelling for someone who used to be at the pinnacle of society, but is now a reject who must hide behind a façade of monstrosity in order to cope with his fate.

In many ways, the Beast can serve as a representation for the homosexual. In the past, he was a reputable prince; however, he was given a curse that took away his beauty

and prestige. The Beast, despite his body's terrifying appearance, still wears the over-the-top elegant clothes of a dandy. In this way, the clothes – or rather, camp itself – serves as an armor that protects the homosexual from being seen as a complete unruly beast.

Without his clothes, the Beast would seem like little more than a large humanoid animal; with them on, the viewer is reminded of his humanity and his superior social status. In the same way, the homosexual is included more readily in wider society when he puts on an act that aligns with societal norms, which means that he must act in accordance with heteronormativity. This juxtaposition between his inner nature and the outer appearance that he attempts to create is camp. By being something that he is not, the homosexual is both in and out of society, which is a campy position to be in.

If the Beast is to be interpreted as the homosexual, then Belle must represent not a romantic interest, but a heterosexual ally. The Beast's attitude towards Belle is one of wanting to gain understanding and acceptance; over time, Belle sees less of the "beastly" qualities of the Beast and begins to see the true soul behind the two layers of façade. The first layer being camp itself, the armor that he hides behind. The second layer is the body of the Beast, which is the monstrous picture that society paints of homosexuals. Beast spends a significant portion of the film being ashamed of his appearance; he insists upon hiding from Belle most of the time, and usually requires that she not look at him. Over time, and through her patient love and acceptance, Belle is able to help him open up. In much the same way, allies to queer people can do the same thing.

One aspect of the story that helps the Beast become less afraid of his inner self is the fact that much of this character development takes place in the castle itself. The castle represents the realm of queerness, or a realm of camp itself. The castle's décor is camp,

and Belle even begins to dress in much the same extravagant way that Beast does, which in essence is her effort to fit into his world. In the same way, when heterosexual allies learn the “language” of queerness and of camp, they are able to better assist the homosexual in their own self-liberation from the guilt that society places upon them for following their nature. Much like homosexuals, for most of the film, the Beast only feels comfortable coming out from hiding at night. For much of queer history as well as the modern era, nightlife is a safe haven for queer people.

Thus, Diana’s Pavilion represents the inner identity of the homosexual. By giving Belle (the heterosexual) the key to the Pavilion, Beast (the homosexual) is entrusting her with a power to destroy him. By giving the heterosexual ally the information that he is a homosexual, the homosexual thereby grants her the power to destroy him. Belle, of course, does not betray his trust. Thereby Avenant and Belle’s siblings, representing heteronormative society, attempt to destroy the homosexual for their own benefit and because they see it as their duty to do so. Thus, when Avenant is shot whilst breaking into the Pavilion, he transforms into the Beast while the Beast transforms into his original human form. By this, the true monster, heteronormative homophobic society, is revealed to be the true “monster” while the object of their persecution is the one who is truly human.

A different sort of character influences the role of camp in another of Cocteau’s films, *L’Aigle à deux têtes* (1948). The Queen is an extravagant yet quirky figure, who prefers the things that one would not typically associate with monarchs, such as thunderstorms, bats, and broken windows. Her relationship with an anarchist whose original intent was to assassinate her, a man named Stanislas, played by Jean Marais,

adds to the overall camp of the character by going against what the audience would have anticipated out of a female from the nobility. Aiding her role as the vanguard of camp for the film are the creative selections in regards to the set and costume design, as well as dialogue.

The castle itself, Krantz, is established as a separate realm from the rest of the world through stark differences in lighting. The first scene in which the Queen, accompanied by two others, travels in a carriage across rugged terrain is lit in a fashion that seems to be in the manner of realism - it would likely fit into any documentary film. However, when the next scene, staged at Krantz, occurs, the lighting significantly changes. It becomes darker, with the only light sources being man-made. The characters' dialogue explains the change, noting that there are "always thunderstorms" at the castle. The idea of an old spooky manor at which it is always storming conjures up images of films such as James Whale's *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *Frankenstein* (1931), which use the trope as a means of establishing the overall mood of the work. This trope was later used in the camp classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). In conjunction with the constant thunder and lightning, Cocteau often uses spotlights in some scenes that follow the character that the camera is focusing upon. One example of this would be the scene in which the Queen is walking through her chambers in a frilly dress whilst holding a candelabra – Cocteau seemed quite fond of candelabras – and a spotlight focuses upon her visage as she closes the door and holds the back of her hand to her forehead in a gesture of exaggerated exasperation.

Marais's character, Stanislaus, is the sexual object of the film yet again. As was seen in *La Belle et la bête*, Cocteau gave his lover the male leading role and dressed him

in costumes that err towards the revealing and sexualized. The first scene in which Marais appears, Stanislaus is wearing a white cotton shirt with a neckline that descends down most of the length of his torso, and he is glistening with sweat and blood as if he were the centerspread in a spooky-themed issue of *Playgirl*.

In the same scene, the Queen's clothing serves as a juxtaposition to the pauper-like adornments of Stanislaus. She dons an elegant dress, complete with many ruffles and jewels. Her hair falls down her back, with shiny stars decorating her many brunette waves.

The differences in appearance between the Queen and Stanislaus serves as foils to one another, which sets the dynamic of the relationship: she is of a higher social class than he is. Being the exact opposite dynamic of Belle and the Beast, in which the Beast was nobility and Belle from a family that was formerly wealthy and is now impoverished, the Queen and Stanislaus serve as another example of gender roles being reversed in Cocteau's films. The Queen is in a position of power that grants her the ability to theoretically be rid of Stanislaus whenever she pleases. As an anarchist and a would-be assassin, he would have likely met a quick death. However, instead of doing so, the Queen falls in love with him.

The Queen could represent Cocteau himself. His romance with Marais, another man, would have been considered scandalous and dangerous in his era. Of course, in many ways, Cocteau could have been protected to some extent by his fame. For the average man in those times, falling in love with another man could mean death. In the same way, the romance between the Queen and Stanislaus is one that is born out of danger and faces much resistance from the people who represent the forces of societal

pressure and conformity.

Cocteau's camp largely lies in the realm of the visual: it is through costumes, sets, lighting, and the blocking of actors that one may receive it. The aforementioned underlying messages come about only if the viewer were to analyze the images themselves. However, there are many things that the images may tell. Not only were these films love letters to Marais, but they were love letters to queerness itself; they are both a celebration and a commentary.

### III. JEAN GENET: TORTURED MINDS AND PHALDIC DREAMS

Jean Genet only ever made one film: *Un chant d'amour* (1950). It is a mere 28 minutes long and there is no dialogue. The only audio in the film is the score, which is one continuous jazz-style melody that shifts tone and tempo to match the action in each scene. The film follows three characters: a young prisoner, an older prisoner, and a prison guard. The prison guard acts as a voyeur, watching both prisoners through a peephole in their doors whilst they perform masturbatory actions. The older prisoner is a hairy, masculine sort of man who would fit in to any *Tom of Finland* comic, while the younger prisoner is of a slimmer, shorter build. It becomes apparent through his actions and delusions that the older prisoner is fixated sexually and romantically upon the younger prisoner, and the guard seems to notice this, which drives him to partake in the eroticism in his own way by making the older prisoner suck on his pistol. Camp appears in this film in two distinct ways: through the actions of the prisoners with one another, and through the ensuing reaction of the guard.

The film begins with the younger prisoner seeming disinterested in the older prisoner. When the older prisoner puts a straw through a hole in the wall and begins to puff smoke through it – presumably so the younger prisoner could smoke it himself – it is denied. However, as the older prisoner begins to rub his hands all over his body, including his chest and genitals, the tempo of the music begins to speed up. In an act of exasperation, the older prisoner pulls out his penis and slams his body against the wall (which, it must be noted, is covered in crude phallic drawings) between them; he rolls on the wall, his arms up, as if to demonstrate in the most exaggerated way that he is full of

lust and longing for the prisoner next door. As things begin to heat up, the younger prisoner also begins to pleasure himself, and later accepts the elder's secondhand smoke with gusto. This gradual buildup is aided by the music, and by a repeating scene that appears several times throughout the film: one arm hangs out the prison window and attempts to pass a small bundle of flowers to the hand of the other prisoner, who is unable to grasp it. The flowers represent the desires of the older prisoner; and this failed transaction represents the younger prisoner's lack of willingness to accept the elder's love until the end of the film when he finally grasps the flowers.

Throughout the film, there are two desires that juxtapose within the mind of the older prisoner: the sexual and the romantic. The sexual desire is seen in the "real" world through both the erotic behaviors displayed by the prisoners and an intermittent repeating scene of two naked men writhing around one another's glistening bodies in acts that one can conclude resemble some form of elaborate foreplay. In contrast, there is a part of the film in which the older prisoner experiences a daydream in which he and the younger prisoner frolic in a lush woodland forest and behave like a doting couple; this daydream does not feature any eroticism until it ends abruptly by the older prisoner reaching into the younger's pants. Sex in the world of the daydream serves, therefore, as the end of romance. The mere act of the erotic acting as an abrupt end to what would otherwise be a scene that could fit into any romance film is a form of camp. The older prisoner reaching for the younger prisoner's genitals ruins what would otherwise be a cute, respectable scene of a couple in the eyes of society – at least, if they were a heterosexual couple.

Therein lies the beating heart of *Un chant d'amour* – this film depicts desires, both sexual and romantic, that viewers at the time would have found at the very least

bizarre, if not unsettling. However, Genet's depiction of the desires of the older prisoner demonstrated how he ached not only for sexual gratification, but for a romantic companion. This is a camp act because Genet's depiction of homoeroticism and homosexual romance both agrees with and clashes with the expectations of the public at the time.

There is an ongoing stereotype of homosexuals and queer people as a whole that they are more promiscuous than heterosexuals; the blatant near-pornographic nature of many parts of *Un chant d'amour* aligns with the image of this stereotype. In contrast, the daydream scene clashes with this view, and instead depicts the homosexual as someone who aches for the same romantic fulfillment in relationships that heterosexuals seek. In this way, *Un chant d'amour* pushes the boundaries of how homosexual love is viewed in the eyes of heterosexual society. Camp, defined before as being a state of being both in and out of society, therefore takes place in the film by feeding the viewer visual information for most of the film that would align with their preconceived notions and then using those against them in order to shock the mind into changing its views.

The guard acts as a stand-in for the audience in this way. He acts as a voyeur into the world of the prisoners, frantically going between the two cells in order to watch them in their sexual activity. The scene in which the music and prisoners are at a climax shows the guard in a frenzy, viewing the prisoners as if they were risqué cabaret performers or a pornographic film. By acting in such a fashion, the guard becomes camp, becoming a parody of a prison guard. Society considers prison guards to be serious and tough on prisoners; they are not meant to be sexually excited by them. The guard knows this as well, and when he finds himself becoming aroused by the antics of the prisoners, he pulls

out his gun, walks into the cell of the older prisoner, and whips him with his belt. This act not only forces the older prisoner to mentally escape into the romantic daydream, but it serves as a vehicle by which the guard represses his own desires by literally beating out the desires of the older prisoner. Therefore, if the guard is a stand-in for the audience, then perhaps Genet intended for the audience to have a similar reaction. The film itself is meant to subvert expectations and shock the audience with images and relationships that most would not have seen before. The purpose of the intended shock could be to find other “guards” in the audience – people who have same-sex attraction themselves – and awaken the homosexual within.

#### **IV. RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER: THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF MELODRAMA**

In contrast to Genet's film, the angst that occurs in the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder does not center around the characters' homosexuality. Rather, he placed homosexual characters in melodramatic situations that have very little to do with their being homosexual. Indeed, it would not feel out of place if the homosexual characters were replaced with heterosexuals; the stories themselves would not change significantly. Therefore, camp arises in a different form and with a different purpose. Camp comes in the form of melodramatic acting as well as through the usual perpetrators, costumes and sets.

*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) is split into several scenes that all take place in the apartment of the fashion designer protagonist, Petra. The film is very dialogue-heavy, with most of the story centered around verbal interactions between characters. The first scene begins with Petra, putting on an extravagantly beaded and tasseled white robe along with a short brown wig. She commands Marlene, her co-designer, to do several tasks with a haughty tone in her voice. Petra does not consider Marlene to be her equal; she treats her more like an assistant who performs many mundane tasks for her. The film almost entirely takes place in her apartment's bedroom, which is adorned with many naked mannequins and a workspace for Petra and Marlene to design in. Petra's friend, Sidonie, arrives. As they chat, Marlene leaves the room to fetch coffee for them, but stops to turn around, gaze through the glass at the two women, and place her hand on the glass, looking down in a dramatic motion of deep angst.

Melodrama, as a form of behavior that is exaggerated, becomes a form of camp.

In contrast to camp romance as can be seen in Cocteau's works, which is the feeling of love taken to the umpteenth degree, melodrama is a hyperbolic form of anguish. In this sense, the camp of Cocteau and the camp of Fassbinder are exact opposites. Cocteau's camp displays the feeling of seeing through rose-tinted glasses; Fassbinder's camp displays the feeling of seeing through grey-tinted ones.

Fassbinder's films often deal with characters whose ideals of romance are dashed by harsh reality. Petra falls deeply in love with Karin, a young woman who hopes to be a model. As the film progresses, it becomes clearer that Karin is only using Petra for her money and resources. Their affair ends with Petra lying on the floor in her apartment on her birthday by herself, drinking heavily, surrounded by camp objects. She wears an emerald green tulle dress, a necklace consisting of a puff of red tulle, and a curled blonde wig fit for a drag queen. She lies on a white shag carpet which stretches over the entire bottom half of the screen like an ocean of the essence of 1970s interior design whilst a dramatic Renaissance-era painting depicting a melodramatic scene makes up the background. This scene demonstrates a central part of the camp of Fassbinder: that melodrama and angst can be fabulous at the same time.

In addition, this scene takes place in the context of a same-sex relationship. Romantic angst in homosexual relationships is different than the angst that comes about in heterosexual relationships. In a homosexual relationship, not only is there the sort of romantic drama that occurs in every relationship, but there is an added layer of societal rejection that both parties must cope with. Petra is experiencing an attraction to another woman. This means that not only must she deal with rejection from Karin, but she must also come to terms with a rejection from society for this attraction she feels. Thus, many

aspects of her character are dedicated to the upholding of an image of a coldly refined paragon of style and camp. She is cruel to Marlene, and tends to behave cynically and snobbishly to everyone she encounters. She wears wigs throughout the film; the audience only sees her real hair at the very beginning and at the very end. The end of the film is a scene in which Petra, wigless and in her bed, is apologetic to her mother and to Marlene for the way she has treated them. It is only after she physically removes this layer of camp – the wigs, the clothing, and the visual surroundings of the apartment beyond her bed – that she is able to be her true self. Her façade of cruelty that coincided with the aesthetic choices she made in clothing and hair was a mechanism that was meant to defend herself from the sort of rejection that Karin and society gave her. In this case, camp, much like the Beast in *La Belle et la bête*, serves as armor for another character who serves as a representation of the homosexual.

*Querelle* (1982) is Fassbinder's final film. It is based on Genet's 1947 novel *Querelle de Brest*. The film follows Querelle, a sailor, who engages in both homosexual and heterosexual affairs. Visually, the film is as campy as it can possibly be. The sky is a fake-looking shade of orange; it seems almost as if the director purposefully wanted it to look as much like a set as possible rather than adhering to realism. Before this film, Fassbinder mainly shot on location. However, he did not try to hide the fact that *Querelle* was shot in a studio. This is because, unlike his earlier films, *Querelle* is not meant to be realistic. It is not meant to be a story that could theoretically take place in real life; it can only exist in the imagination. As the ship carrying Querelle pulls into port, the viewer sees small towers along the seawall of the city that look exactly like penises – testes included. This is accompanied by a few lines of dialogue given by the ship's captain that

comment upon the “strong and supple” bodies of the sailors, of whom very few are wearing a shirt.

*Querelle* is dripping with gay imagery: shirtless sailors, a cop wearing only a leather vest and his uniform hat, a brothel madame who wears feathers and jewels, a color palette that extends to every end of the rainbow, and homoerotic symbols at every turn. It is made to seem as if Brest is a different world entirely from our own; it is one where almost everyone is at least bisexual and that is a normal part of everyday life.

Dialogue is essential to the camp of *Querelle* as well. There is a third-person omniscient narrator who often comments on the film’s events. At one point, the narrator describes Querelle as “the hero of those who are contemptuous.” Throughout the film, Querelle does many things that society would find reprehensible: he’s a bisexual thief and murderer who frames his lover for a crime that he did not commit. However, he is the film’s protagonist, and the audience has no choice but to watch his story and adopt his point of view.

In this way, *Querelle* gives insight into Fassbinder’s views on homosexuality and on love. Aesthetically, the film is entirely within the realm of the queer aesthetic and within camp. The story, however, depicts queer characters being generally unsavory: murderers, thieves, whoremongers, drug dealers, crooked cops, and belligerents. Fassbinder’s pattern of not giving queer characters any sort of positivity and often depriving them of life and love could be interpreted as internalized homophobia, but that reading of his films would be misguided. Until *Querelle*, Fassbinder paid no particular mind to his characters’ statuses as homosexual; rather, the story would focus on subjects that could theoretically carry over to a heterosexual character and be no different. The

gay characters were simply gay – that was not important. This is best interpreted as an attempt on the part of Fassbinder to aid in the normalization of queer people and queer relationships in the way that he depicted them as having issues that heterosexuals have as well.

However, in *Querelle*, queer sexuality is overtly expressed and it is the primary sensibility in regards to visuals and character interactions. This signifies a drastic break from Fassbinder's earlier films. Rather than homosexuality not being important to the story, it is a device through which the story advances: in order to be able to sleep with Lysiane, Querelle must roll dice with her husband Nono. If Querelle loses, Nono is allowed to have sex with Querelle before Querelle is allowed access to Lysiane. There are other instances throughout the film in which homosexuality is openly referred to and spoken about by the characters, typically in reference to having sex with other men. The superfluous amount of queer sexuality must mean that Fassbinder, much like Genet in *Un chant d'amour*, was attempting to shock heterosexual audiences by exposing them to homosexual characters and the queer aesthetic.

In order to draw them into the film and to coerce them into continuing to watch it, Fassbinder wraps these scenes in camp imagery so as to make the film visually interesting. His use of color in particular is visually appealing, with many different hues of colored lighting being used to literally set the emotion for each scene, one example being the scene in which Querelle kills Vic, which is bathed in a deep shade of red light. In addition, the costumes are caricature-like: vintage sailors' uniforms; beaded and feathered dresses; and men wearing tight tank-tops.

The sense of homosexual yearning is explored through the character of Lieutenant

Seblon, who is in love with Querelle. He keeps an audio diary in which he often monologues about the desperate feelings of angst he feels due to his love for Querelle, whom he believes will never return the sentiment. However, in the end, he and Querelle end up being together. This is another drastic change for Fassbinder, who almost never allowed the characters in his films to have non-tragic or depressing endings. *Querelle* is different, however, because it is Fassbinder's final film. Perhaps the reason he was willing to express homosexuality in a way that was more overt and that ended in a satisfactory way for the protagonist was because any repercussions he faced would not be as consequential. Therefore, *Querelle* stands as a final, slightly sweeter farewell from a director whose works were often focused upon the pain and melancholy of queer existence.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, these three directors all used camp as a means of expressing a different aspect of queer existence. Cocteau used it as a way to express his love for Jean Marais as well as to demonstrate the state of mind of the closeted homosexual; Genet used it in order to explore themes of sexuality and gay romance; and Fassbinder used it as a means to investigate the negative side of queerness as well as to resist heteronormativity through the use of shock.

In doing so, these directors and their takes on camp demonstrate the essential aspect of camp that it is a tool for queer directors as a means of expressing their thoughts and feelings towards their own existence. To be camp is to be both in and out of society, and all three of these directors are well-known in greater society, yet many of their films explore themes that critique society's attitudes towards queer lives. Camp is to take what is normal and exaggerate it until it isn't. Exaggeration in these films was used as a vehicle through which society can look at its own reflection using stories that it would not normally listen to. For most of history, to be queer meant to be ignored; therefore, camp is a means of being so loud that it is impossible to be ignored. The emotions, the costumes, the sets, the acting – everything is bigger because it must be so. Camp is an artform perfected in the arena of queerness, and an understanding of camp leads one to a better understanding of the queer experience.

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