

## From Sensibility to Performativity. Susan Sontag's Theory of Camp, Revisited from a Hispanic Perspective

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**Abstract.** Sontag's concept of *camp* was a milestone for international cultural criticism. Her essay was also widely received in the Spanish-speaking world, above all by gay critics. Here, the reactions of two intellectuals who dealt with Sontag's "Notes" early on are examined as examples: the Spanish Jaime Gil de Biedma, who relates the context of specific gay behavior in his country ("tener pluma") to Sontag's theses, and the Mexican Carlos Monsiváis, who reflects on them in light of the historical and sociocultural situation of a Latin American country. Whereas these critics relate camp to the conditions in their own countries, the Argentine José Amícola interprets *camp* as an expression of international postmodernism. This is followed by the question of the role of the AIDS discussion and the relevance of "conscious camp" in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Camp; Susan Sontag; Jaime Gil de Biedma; Carlos Monsiváis; José Amícola.

[es] De la sensibilidad a la performatividad. La teoría de lo camp de Susan Sontag revisitada desde una perspectiva hispánica

**Resumen.** El concepto de «camp» planteado por Sontag fue un hito para la crítica cultural internacional así como su ensayo, que también tuvo una gran resonancia en el mundo hispanohablante. En este trabajo se examinan, a modo de ejemplo, las reacciones de dos intelectuales que se ocuparon tempranamente de las *Notas sobre lo camp* de Sontag: el español Jaime Gil de Biedma, que relaciona el contexto del comportamiento típicamente gay en su país (el «tener pluma») con las tesis de Sontag y el mexicano Carlos Monsiváis, que reflexiona sobre estas notas en relación con la situación histórica y sociocultural de un país latinoamericano. Mientras que estos críticos relacionan lo «camp» con las condiciones de sus propios países, el argentino José Amícola interpreta «camp» como fenómeno del postmodernismo internacional. A modo de conclusión, se plantea el papel de este concepto en el debate sobre el SIDA y la relevancia del «conscious camp» en el siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** Camp; Susan Sontag; Jaime Gil de Biedma; Carlos Monsiváis; José Amícola.

**Sumario.** 1. *Notes on camp* – a bolt out of the blue. 2. *Camp and pluma* – Jaime Gil de Biedma and the Hispanic variation of *camp*. 3. Mexico, dominion of *camp*: Carlos Monsiváis. 4. Criticising Sontag. 5. José Amícola: **Camp** and Post-avant-gard. 6. Acknowledgment. 7. Sources of funding. 8. Reference list.

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### 1. *Notes on camp* – a bolt out of the blue

Recently, two events showed the undiminished topicality of Susan Sontag: on the one hand, the publication of Benjamin Moser's biography *Sontag. Her Life and Work* (2019) and on the other hand, the Met Gala 2019 of the Metropolitan Museum of Art which chose as its subject *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, following up inexorably the line of Sontag's famous essay. As the Gala attests to the topicality of these *Notes* rather than the desire for revisions, Moser's book stands out among Sontag's inflationary biographies for its thorough research, resolute stance on embarrassing questions and the authorization of Sontag's son. The sometimes controversial book, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography and Autobiography 2020, offers new and decisive perspectives on the cultural and historical place of the *Notes*. Of course, Moser's biography does not refrain from reproducing all the gossip about the author who had become a media star, about her meetings with Andy Warhol or Jacqueline Kennedy, about her ambiguous relationship

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with photographer Annie Leibovitz, and about the problematic relationship with her own lesbian desire. And Moser makes it clear that the Sontag *Notes* were her entry into the world of the ‘good people’ of America.

Before we approach the concept and the reception of the essay in the Spanish-speaking world, we must briefly examine the original versions and their conditions. – It is well known that the short essay (of about 15 pages) first appeared in the autumn 1964 edition of the *Partisan Review*, a text that Sontag had written during her fourth visit to Paris in the summer of that year. Moser reports that she had made sketches on this subject much earlier, during a stay in Greece in 1958. It is striking that the initial title of these sketches, *Notes on Homosexuality*, has been replaced by *Notes on Camp*. If one looks at these early fragments (printed in Moser’s book), one is struck by the accumulation of commonplaces, prejudices and stereotypes whose apodictic and often homophobic character do not always correspond to what we call “positive discrimination” of queer people. At first she describes the body language of her gay acquaintances:

Homosexuality and narcissism. Concern with clothes, with aging, with beauty [...] Homosexuals are extraordinarily vain. Concern with being beautiful. Obsessed by idea of getting old. [...] No one finds an old queen attractive. Not like lesbians who look for “character” more than for “looks”. [...] Faggot taste in interior decoration. [...] Homosexual speech: (1) high-pitched, heavily accented voice, flapping hands and other between-the-wars mannerism of English upper class women. “Dahling, whenever did you get back from Istanbul....” (Moser, 2019, pp. 230-231)

Retrospectively speaking, one might wonder whether this is homophobic or just funny. But calling the observation of gay men in the bars *bird-watching* (as she does) disdains this group, so that – apart from exotization and folklorization – there is also a dehumanization of homosexual practices that may be explained by the circumstances of the time, but that nevertheless has to be seen critically from today’s perspective. Let me remind that *foygele* (little bird) in Yiddish is a cussword for a gay man.

Comparing the initial *Notes on Homosexuality* with the final version designated *Notes on Camp*, penned in 1964, the titles exhibit a clear thematic change: While the sketches illuminate a variant of human sexual behaviour – homosexuality –, the subsequent essay deals with a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon, *camp*. According to one of the essay’s central theses, *camp* is a specific sensitivity that can be associated, for example, with artefacts such as Art Deco lampshades, “Swan Lake” or Sunset Boulevard, because all this is camp, postulates Sontag. *Camp* consists in playing roles, in taking artificial positions, in the privilege of the non-serious:

41. The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to “the serious”. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious (Sontag, 1964, p. 10).

Thus, the *Partisan Review* essay loses its exclusive focus on male homosexuality and is devoted to a general phenomenon that is still in a loose but significant relationship with certain homosexual lifestyles, because towards the end of the essay, *camp* is defined as a sensitivity and a style for which being gay is not yet a sufficient condition, but which helps decisively. Unlike the first sketch, in which the term “homosexual” and its variants are constantly referenced, in the final *Notes* the word appears only on a single page (in paragraphs 51 and 53). It reads:

The peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained. While it’s not true that Camp taste *is* homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap. Not all liberals are Jews, but Jews have shown a peculiar affinity for liberal and reformist causes. So, not all homosexuals have Camp taste. [...] (The analogy is not frivolously chosen. Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture. [...]) The two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.) (Sontag 1964, p. 12)

I will not argue to what extent this definition is homophobic and philosemitic or exactly the opposite. Considering the entire early sketch, the judgment will be rather negative. Alessa Domínguez highlights the opposition between “gay sensibility” and the power of the “idea”, which Sontag denies to homosexuals in the final version of 1964: “She wrote the camp essay in part because, as she notes, she wanted to figure out how to capture a sensibility – as opposed to an idea – in writing.” (Dominguez, 2019, s. p.).

Despite their exclusionary nature, the “Notes on the Camp” immediately became a huge, though not unanimous success, both in heterosexual and gay reception. Since then, hundreds of books and articles have dealt with camp culture, and almost always with reference to the initial Sontag essay. In view of the date when the “Notes on the Camp” were composed, it should be noted that they were written before Stonewall and the gay liberation movements, when “gay people were assumed to be sick, deranged, and perverted” in the U.S. (Moser, 2019, p. 233), and also before Foucault’s *Histoire de la Sexualité* and Judith Butler’s gender theory writings, a fact that should be taken into account with regard to the theoretical peculiarity and historical location of Sontag’s reflections. It can also explain (and to some extent excuse) their pre-theoretical character, their internal contradictions and their illogical tricks. It

is important to note that after its publication in the *Partisan Review*, the “Notes” had a huge effect and an extremely controversial reception in the American public sphere; conservative cultural critics saw this concept as questioning the fundamental values of the Western world and feared its moral decline. On the other hand, there were many people in the vicinity of the emerging gay emancipation movements who were happy that in the midst of the homophobic position of the Church and conservative politics of the U. S. and Western Europe, at least something relevant was written about the homosexual community. Sontag’s reflections were celebrated as the decisive step in finding the practice of homosexual life in the aesthetic design of everyday life (cf. Moser, 2019, p. 235).

Published in the *Partisan Review*, the “Notes” came out of the blue. They became particularly well known when the author included them in her programmatic volume *Against interpretation* (1966, Spanish edition 1983), in which they fit so well because they could be considered an example of a stylistic and cultural phenomenon that explicitly targets traditional (hermeneutic or political) patterns of understanding, and therefore its inherent quality is to be opposed to “interpretation”. Sontag’s multifaceted definitions of camp reveal how dubious “interpretation” can be. The reprint of the essay in 1966 causes a long-lasting thunderclap after the lightning of the publication in the *Partisan Review*, which ensures that this essay continues to have an intense effect on public discourse. Thus, the sudden prominence of this young writer and cultural critic is largely due to her theory of *camp* and its revolutionary character. Moser tries to explain their indirect social effect:

More than a coded assertion of equality, this was a bold statement of homosexual superiority. The idea that gay people were inferior to straight people was generally unquestioned as the idea that women are inferior to men, or blacks to whites. And it was this that made “Notes on ‘Camp’” as threatening as black nationalism was to white supremacy. (Moser, 2019, p. 233)

And Moser gives Sontag credit for the fact that camp in the 1960s came to symbolise a new liberal attitude towards sexuality, politics and society, though it was certainly based on cultural values of a Western elite rather than on concrete socio-political messages.

## 2. *Camp and pluma* – Jaime Gil de Biedma and the Hispanic variation of *camp*

Yet, the “Notes on camp” implied a new attitude towards European, Western cultural tradition which also had a significant radiation outside the U.S. If the objective of this conference held in Madrid in the autumn of 2019 is to review the *camp* concept, I propose to do so with the eyes of two people from the Hispanic world. It goes without saying that the criticism of Sontag’s *camp* theory was most clearly articulated in the Anglo-American theoretical discourse. On the other hand, it is known that in Hispanic literatures and cultures *camp* seems to be a particularly fruitful category for characterising the writing of a large number of authors, from Terenci Moix to Eduardo Mendicutti in Spain, from Severo Sarduy to Nestor Perlongher in Latin America. *Camp* seems to correspond to the aesthetics of the *loca latina*, the “Latin fairy”, a central figure in the Hispanic queer discourse, who produces under the sign of a ‘pink’ writing the aesthetics of *camp* and its language. This development has intensified since the formation of local gay movements in the 1970s, especially in the late and post-dictatorial societies of Spanish-speaking countries.

In Spanish, the “Notas sobre lo camp” (“Notes on camp”) appeared for the first time in 1966 in the *Revista de Occidente*, but the article did not receive much attention until 1984, when it was republished in the Spanish version of *Against Interpretation* (*Contra la interpretación y otros ensayos*). The preliminary and provisional study of 1958 (“Notes on Homosexuality”) was obviously never published in Spanish.

There are two persons, a Spaniard and a Mexican, who very soon read, commented on and criticized Susan Sontag. I will present first Jaime de Biedma, the famous Catalan poet and critic, a cosmopolitan who was called the “Consul of Sodom”, as Sigfrid Monleón titled his well-known biopic from 2009. In 1978, five years before the publication of *Contra la interpretación* in Spanish, Gil de Biedma had a long conversation with José Ramón Enríquez and Bruce Swansey about Sontag’s theory of *camp* (Enríquez, 1978, pp. 195-216) in which he presents her headlines and defines his own position towards them. There are elements shared by Gil de Biedma and Sontag, for example, when he talks about the relationship between *camp* and homosexuality: “Camp art is a related and often revealing manifestation, but it is not necessarily homosexual” (cf. Enríquez, 1978, p. 201).

It is known that Sontag was inspired by Christopher Isherwood’s *The World in the evening* (1954), and she significantly quotes the notorious Oscar Wilde (to whom she dedicated her text). Gil de Biedma also refers to these two authors (confusing Isherwood’s 1954 novel with the author’s *Prater Violet* from 1945). In relation to Wilde Gil de Biedma contradicts Sontag’s assessment: he considers a *camp* reading of the *Portrait of Dorian Gray* possible, “but in reality it is not. There Wilde is a kind of Sunday preacher of decadence, he takes it too seriously<sup>3</sup>” (cf. Enríquez, 1978, p. 197). Although both remain silent about Wilde’s sufferings, about his imprisonment in Reading Jail and his tragic end, Gil de Biedma takes a much more differentiated position towards him than Sontag. Gil considers him

<sup>2</sup> El arte *camp* es una manifestación afin, y muchas veces reveladora, pero no es necesariamente homosexual, all notes translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> pero en realidad no lo es. Ahí Wilde es una especie de predicador dominical del decadentismo, se lo toma demasiado en serio.

a preacher-like (and thus “serious”) prophet of decadence, while Sontag stylises him as an apostle of the playful, superficial, and non-serious.

A question that implies a clear criticism of Sontag’s definition arises at the beginning of Gil de Biedma’s conversation with Enríquez and Swansey when they ask him: “Talking about a homosexual sensibility, can’t it be reactionary? Aren’t we justifying the ghetto?” (Enríquez, 1978, p. 201). Gil de Biedma gives a moderately negative answer, to the effect that *camp* sensibility “can be a homosexual characteristic of heterosexuals” (cf. Enríquez, 1978, p. 201). Asked how he defines and understands *camp*, Gil de Biedma replies: “In English homosexual jargon, *camp* meant and means exactly the same as *pluma* in Spanish jargon” (*–pluma* is literally *feather* and indicates gay mannerism, D.I.–; cf. Enríquez, 1978, p. 196), to proceed immediately to his examples of gay subjects and having *pluma* in the Generation of 1927, Alberti, Salinas, Prados and others, hetero- and homosexuals. He calls Lorca’s *Romancero Gitano camp* (and let me add that Luis Antonio de Villena later called it “a homosexual text”). For Gil de Biedma, the clearest representative of *camp* is Luis Cernuda: In Cernuda, “*camp* is not so much an aesthetic attitude as pure and simple *pluma*” (cf. Enríquez, 1978, p. 200). And then he returns to Sontag’s theory to make his own point more precise:

Sontag’s operation, by exploiting the homosexual meaning of the term, was far from arbitrary. After all, the *pluma* is a complicated [...] sociocultural creation of the *ghetto*. As a native manifestation, it does not exist. Not even in these effeminate little boys that people often say ‘have it in them’; in them it is an instinctive social reflex of defence, with respect to their insecurity in front of others, and many will never become the faggot... In full-fledged homosexuals, the matter is quite different: *pluma* then is a deliberate impersonation, which can oscillate between grotesque parody and ironic stylisation of the ‘faggot’, that is, of the image that heterosexuals have of homosexuals, and which of course does not correspond to the genuine reality of any of them. It is a mythical image, made up of the burdens, frustrations and hangover of conventional virility. To ‘show *pluma*’ is to make heterosexual values symbolically present in the ghetto coterie, for all to mock them, desecrating them with caricature. *Pluma* is a ritual of collective complicity and a refined revenge...<sup>8</sup> (cf. Enríquez, 1978, p. 201).

While Sontag resorts to an essentialist definition of her object – “sensibility” as the essence of being gay (and intelligence as the essence of being Jewish) –, Gil de Biedma’s “cultural creation” corresponds to the socially constructed character of camp. Obviously, calling *camp* a “hangover of conventional virility” is less benevolent than to praise the sensibility of homosexual people, and opens a much less positive perspective on the role of gay people in camp aesthetics as Sontag’s concept does. Instead Gil de Biedma, considering camp as a category of social life, states: “camp is fundamentally an exhibition” (cf. Enríquez 1978, p. 201). The term “exhibition” – together with Carlos Monsiváis’s key notion, “ritual” – point in a current, post-Butlerian context to the complex notion of the “performative”. Without mentioning this very term, not yet in use at that time, Gil de Biedma’s concept of *camp* – and that is where I see his great innovation – prefigures rather Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance than referring to Sontag’s identity principles. In a detailed article, Marcie Frank elaborates on the idea of performativity in Sontag’s work, considering the concept as a key to her entire theory (1993). However, the “Notes” insist on sensibility as the defining main principle, not on performativity – and the performance might serve at best to describe a general stance of the essay itself.

### 3. Mexico, dominion of *camp*: Carlos Monsiváis

The second person from the Hispanic world who critically engaged himself with Sontag’s theory is Carlos Monsiváis (1938-2010). According to Humberto Guerra, he is “Mexico’s most ubiquitous and listened-to public intellectual”<sup>10</sup> (Guerra 2019, p. 124). He was also a collector, known far beyond Mexico’s borders, whose private museum of things – objects of all kinds – can still be visited today in the centre of Mexico City. This “Museo del Estanquillo” always shows only a small part of the objects he collected aimlessly. Monsiváis, whom I met in Berlin long ago as a brilliant interlocutor, was a great connoisseur of *kitsch*, *camp* and popular culture in general.

<sup>4</sup> Hablar de una sensibilidad homosexual, ¿no puede resultar reaccionario? ¿No estamos justificando el gueto?

<sup>5</sup> Puede ser una característica homosexual de los heterosexuales.

<sup>6</sup> En jerga homosexual inglesa, *camp* significaba y significa exactamente lo mismo como *pluma* en jerga española.

<sup>7</sup> El *camp* no es tanto una actitud estética como pura y simple *pluma*.

<sup>8</sup> La operación que hizo la Sontag, al aprovecharse del sentido homosexual del término, no era nada arbitraria. Al fin y al cabo, la *pluma* es una complicada ... creación sociocultural del *ghetto*. Como manifestación nativa, no existe. Ni tan siquiera en estos muchachitos afeminados de los que la gente suele decir ‘que lo llevan dentro’; en ellos es un instintivo reflejo social de defensa, con respecto a su inseguridad frente a los demás, y muchos ni llegarán a maricas... En los homosexuales hechos y derechos, el asunto es muy distinto: la *pluma* es una impersonación deliberada, que puede oscilar entre la parodia esperpéntica y la estilización irónica del ‘maricón’, es decir, de la imagen que los heterosexuales tienen del homosexual, y que por supuesto no se corresponde con la genuina realidad de ninguno. Es una imagen mítica, hecha de los agobios, las frustraciones y la Resaca de la virilidad convencional. ‘Sacar la *pluma*’ es hacer simbólicamente presentes los valores heterosexuales en el cotarro del *ghetto*, para que todos se burlen de ellos, profanándolos con la caricatura. La *pluma* es un ritual de complicidad colectiva y una refinada venganza...

<sup>9</sup> El *camp* es fundamentalmente una exhibición.

<sup>10</sup> El intelectual público más ubícuo y escuchado de México.

As early as 1966, Monsiváis already addressed Sontag's essay in an article with the splendid title "Idleness is a Royal Peacock Bored by the Afternoon Sun. Remarks on Camp in Mexico"<sup>11</sup> (in Monsiváis, 1970). With all the respect he pays to Sontag's original approach, he also emphasises the irreconcilable difference between the universalist claim on which her 'Western' concept is based and the idiosyncrasies of Mexico as a country that was still poorly developed at the time, but nevertheless had a very distinctive popular (sub)-culture of its own. Monsiváis's first collection of essays (or chronicles), *Días de guardar*, in which this essay appeared, was published only two years after the violent students' riots, the Tlatelolco Square massacres, an event that shook Mexican society to its foundations. This may explain the essay's clear political intent which contrasts fundamentally with Sontag's apodictic definition of *camp* as "at least" apolitical ("It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical", cf. the discussion about a possibly political dimension in her concept in Peariso, 2009). Thus, in Monsiváis's view, an eminently and necessarily political aspect seems to be inherent in Mexican *camp*: "In a country that has suffered greatly from its politicians, ... its spirit of seriousness and its absolute solemnity, camp is a prospect of justice and revenge"<sup>12</sup> (Monsiváis 1970, p. 191). Monsiváis proposes a historically concrete, socially integrated variant of (gay or proto-gay) popular culture in Mexico, and he bases his demand for a political conception of camp on the legacy of the Mexican Revolution with its tendency towards empty gestures, permanent spectacles, stagings and *mises en scène*.

Critics such as Linda Egan and Alberto Julián Pérez have shown that Monsiváis contrasts Sontag's apolitical *camp* (cf. Egan, 2001; Pérez, 1997). Against Sontag's thesis he interjects: "Isn't an apolitical sensibility in Mexico deception or treason"<sup>13</sup>? (Monsiváis 1970, p. 172). At the beginning of his article on camp, Monsiváis sets out two goals in an ironic statement: "Universals, it's our task to register what goes on in the US; colonials, we have to verify its viability, its possibility of nationalization"<sup>14</sup> (Monsiváis 1970, p. 171). Monsiváis refers to Mexican musicians and actors such as Agustín Lara or Jorge Negrete, who breathed into the microphones "I am a Mexican" ("Yo soy Mexicano") in Mariachi-like habits, a giant sombrero on his head. Negrete was also a trade union boss and a political figure.

The same perception of Mexico's *camp* scene can also be found in Monsiváis's later essays, for example in "Gays in Mexico: the Foundation, Amplification and Consolidation of the Ghetto"<sup>15</sup> (Monsiváis 2010a, first 2002), which includes a look back at Mexico's gay scene in the 1920s, when gay men already proved to be masters of camp, of course without knowing the term popularised by Sontag. He quotes Sontag's definition: "It's a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon, not in the adoption of beauty, but in terms of artifice and stylisation"<sup>16</sup> (Monsiváis, 2010a, p. 113) and then he goes on:

Gays love divas, be they Hollywood, opera, Mexican cinema or popular song, and from them they derive the farcical or melodramatic tone, and through them they acquire the essentials of the repertoire (the museum) of gestures that make up a culture and elevate the vulnerable and the absurdly beautiful to their "altars". Its inevitable model is European at first, and then, organically, North American, and its symbolic capital is elegance. In a very precise sense, the wardrobe is its "ideology" [...] When Ignacio de la Torre, son-in-law of Porfirio Díaz, shows his guests the closet containing two hundred pairs of shoes, and comments: "This, gentlemen, is my library", he is not boasting of his ignorance, although he has it, but of his dandy pose<sup>17</sup> (Monsiváis, 2010a, pp. 113-114).

With this sentence, Monsiváis clearly claims different references for the Mexican gay world from Sontag's, and the process that Mexican gays are going through is leading from the exemplarity of European and North American models to an increasing awareness of their own cultural specificities which he develops in beautiful examples like the one quoted above.

In another of his essays, "Of the varieties of the homoerotic experience"<sup>18</sup> (Monsiváis, 2010b, first: 2007), Monsiváis provides another explicit reference to Sontag and her concept of camp: "In the Anglo-Saxon environment where the expression originated in the 1920s, camp is above all the conversion of homosexual sensibility into a

<sup>11</sup> El hastío es pavo real que se aburre de luz en la tarde. Notas de Camp en México.

<sup>12</sup> En un país que ha padecido vastamente a sus políticos, ... su espíritu de seriedad y su solemnidad absoluta, lo camp es una perspectiva de justicia y venganza.

<sup>13</sup> ¿No es fraude o traición la sensibilidad apolítica en México?

<sup>14</sup> Universales, nos corresponde registrar lo que pasa en Estados Unidos; coloniales, debemos verificar su viabilidad, sus posibilidades de nacionalización.

<sup>15</sup> Los gays en México: la fundación, la ampliación, la consolidación del gueto

<sup>16</sup> Es una manera de ver el mundo como un fenómeno estético, no en la adopción de la belleza, sino en términos de artificio y estilización

<sup>17</sup> Los gays aman a las divas, sean de Hollywood, de la ópera, del cine mexicano o de la canción popular, y de ellas desprenden el tono fársico o el melodramático, y por ellas adquieren lo esencial del repertoire (el museo) de gestos que conforman una cultura y eleva a sus 'altares' a lo vulnerable y lo absurdamente bello. Su modelo inevitable es europeo al principio, y luego, ya en forma orgánica, norteamericano, y su capital simbólico es la elegancia. En un sentido muy preciso, el guardarropa es su 'ideología' [...] Cuando Ignacio de la Torre, yerno de Porfirio Díaz, le enseña a sus invitados el clóset que contiene doscientos pares de zapatos, y comenta: 'Esto, señores, es mi biblioteca', no se jacta de su ignorancia, aunque la tenga, sino de su pose de dandy.

<sup>18</sup> "De las variedades de la experiencia homoerótica"

vanguardia de gusto...<sup>19</sup>” (Monsiváis 2010b, p. 148). From the list of camp persons and objects cited by Sontag he quotes a couple (such as Tiffany lamps, dandyism, the novels of Ronald Firbank or the “flamboyant femaleness of Jayne Mansfield, Gina Lollobrigida<sup>20</sup>” (Monsiváis, 2010, p. 148) to go on with a large list of items which do not appear in Sontag’s list because they are typically Mexican:

the reiteratively melodramatic passion for opera, Salvador Novo (the character and the sonnets), the oil paintings of Saturnio Herrán with the pre-Hispanic body builders, the character of Manuela (Roberto Cobo) in *Lugar sin límites* dancing “La leyenda del beso”, as if Saint Sebastian were rehearsing the reception of the arrows...<sup>21</sup> (Monsiváis, 2010, p. 149).

Again, we recognize the same movement towards a set of rich experience that requires a system of reference such as popular culture, corporality, and Catholic imagination. And he proposes, almost in Sontagian terms, an aspect that includes the effeminate *loca latina*: “To be effeminate is to assume in advance the condition of the vanquished and to transform it as far as possible into the victories of form over any pretence of content<sup>22</sup>” (Monsiváis, 2010a, p. 114). The fairy as a character that is not only marginal, but also defeated, forced to find its own way to survive, is apparently confronted with questions of power. We enter the field where Sontag’s ideas and those of her Hispanic commentators disagree. With her dangerous attempt to connect gays and American Jews as avant-garde in matters of morality or taste respectively, Sontag seems to reintegrate the marginalized into a hegemonic system of white, first-world, affluent, metropolitan men. Many critics reproached her for the “aristocratic” character of her model characters, and many of the *camp* characters of the Hispanic world, from Nazario to Lemebel, from Ocaña to Copi, do not correspond at all to this “elitist” model. Here is a fundamental difference between Sontag’s “English upper class women”-behaviour and the lower class conscience of most *Latin queens*.

In other words, Monsiváis repeats exactly the scheme we found earlier in Jaime Gil de Biedma: the *camp* model is being transferred to the context of their “Hispanic” countries in order to propose a specific genealogy – its own –, different from that of Europe or the United States. In that sense, the selection of reference characters is absolutely revealing: Sontag points to Gina Lollobrigida and Jane Mansfield, Gil de Biedma to Salinas and Lorca, and Monsiváis to Gloria Trevi, María Félix, to the chico Fidencio and Cantinflas. Monsiváis speaks not only of the ‘pre-Hispanic body builders of the painter Saturnino Herrán’, but, in many of his writings on gay culture, he observes a trend completely unknown to Susan Sontag: growing or increased masculinity, that is, a new cult of virility within gay circles. From the perspective of the classical *loca latina*, there are very clear objections against this trend, a consequence of what Denis Altman, many years ago, had called the “Americanisation of homosexuality” (a term which Monsiváis uses as well); – let me recall Pedro Lemebel’s sharp criticism and disdain for the gym, for the physical cult and his contempt of the ‘blond’ American sex... On the other hand, these authors include some of the exaggerated forms of virility in a new performative concept of *camp* – the leather, the uniforms, the pose –, attitudes which spring from the “Western canon of desire”, critically adopted by Latino culture. *Locas latinas* (“Latin fairies”) from Nazario to Gil de Biedma and Monsiváis and some of the characters of Mendicutti’s *Yo no tengo la culpa de haber nacido tan sexy* quote this Western canon as a *camp* phenomenon, including the controversial drawings of Tom of Finland (or the less controversial thoses of Ralf König) or the *camp* aesthetic in Rainer-Werner Fassbinder’s film version of Jean Genet’s *Querelle de Brest* with its papier-mâché backdrop. And it is interesting that these are all examples that do not form part of the canon as Sontag had conceived it.

On the occasion of Susan Sontag’s death in 2004, Monsiváis wrote a long obituary *Susan Sontag (1933-2004). La imaginación y la conciencia histórica*<sup>23</sup>, which he published, as many of his essays, in the review *Debate Feminista* (Monsiváis 2005). Monsiváis’s article opens with reflections on the roots of the term *camp*, referring again to Isherwood’s *The World in the Evening* (1954), a book also central to Sontag. But while the US-American critic reproaches Isherwood for the provisional nature of his “lazy pages” on *camp*, Monsiváis in turn contradicts her, pointing out that Isherwood’s observations “contain the central nucleus of the definition of *camp*<sup>24</sup>” (Monsiváis, 2005, p. 155), right down to the difference between high and low camp, so crucial later on. And as if to take the crown of the first inventor of camp away from Susan Sontag, he points out that the term was coined earlier by Eric Partridge, “in the *Dictionary of Slang* published in the early 1950s, to refer to the ‘effeminate’ language and mannerisms of homosexuals<sup>25</sup>” (Monsiváis, 2005, p. 155). Throughout his article Monsiváis always refers to “camp in Sontag’s sense”,

<sup>19</sup> En el ambiente anglosajón donde la expresión se origina en la década de 1920, el camp es sobre todo la conversión de la sensibilidad homosexual en vanguardia del gusto.

<sup>20</sup> Cítense como ejemplos las lámparas de Tiffany, el dandismo (del siglo XIX adelante), las obras de excéntricos como Ronald Firbank o Jean Cocteau, las paradojas de Oscar Wilde...

<sup>21</sup> La pasión reiterativamente melodramática por la ópera, Salvador Novo (el personaje y los sonetos), los óleos de Saturnio Herrán con los *body builders* prehispánicos, el personaje de la *Manuela* (Roberto Cobo) en *Lugar sin límites* al bailar “La leyenda del beso”, como si san Sebastián ensayase la recepción de las flechas...

<sup>22</sup> Ser afeminado es asumir de antemano la condición de vencido y transformarla hasta donde se puede en las victorias de la forma sobre cualquier pretensión de contenido.

<sup>23</sup> *Susan Sontag, 1933-2004. Imagination and historic conscience.*

<sup>24</sup> contienen el núcleo central de la definición de camp.

<sup>25</sup> En el *Dictionary of Slang* publicado al inicio de los cincuenta, para referirse a lo ‘afeminado’ del lenguaje y ademanes de los homosexuales.

without identifying his own position directly with her concept. Yet he states that at the time of its publication, “Notes on Camp” was a major event and describes its enormous echo in the gay world, even if Sontag sought, according to Monsiváis, to avoid establishing a direct relation between the gay world and camp and preferred an association “by inference<sup>26</sup>” (Monsiváis, 2005, p. 156).

It is true that Monsiváis has often written about gay lifestyles, about gay communities in Latin America, and has actively supported the AIDS movement. He “lived his homosexuality to the full, without any guilt, aware of the originality that exceptional experience can mean<sup>27</sup>”, as Alejandro Brito comments in the introductory note to Monsiváis’s volume *Que se abra esa puerta* (Monsiváis, 2010, p. 40). His activities in and around the gay bars and saunas of the Mexican capital have been posthumously revealed in great detail in Braulio Peralta’s book, *El closet de cristal* (2016). So it is obvious that Monsiváis was well aware of the reproaches of parts of the American gay-lesbian community against Sontag for not coming out of the closet. In post-Stonewall times, when there was a first wave of coming-outs, and more massively after AIDS appeared, some lesbian activists like Jill Johnston or Camille Paglia attempted to force Sontag’s coming-out. Monsiváis is against this form of outing and takes a firm stand for those who condemn such a project as immoral and indecent. As for Susan Sontag’s book *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1989), which has been criticised by part of the gay community at the time, Monsiváis – himself author of a couple of important articles on the endemic – admits that “the title of [Sontag’s] book is never convincing. Unlike cancer, AIDS does not become a metaphor for the spiritual corrosion of the social fabric<sup>28</sup>” (Monsiváis, 2005, p. 163). Other critical comments are harsher, I only mention D. A. Miller calling the book simply phobic (Miller, 1989). It is significant, however, that Monsiváis rejects in principle the outing of other people, an activity of which Sontag had been a well-known victim.

#### 4. Criticising Sontag

I briefly mentioned that American critics were particularly harsh on the person who coined the term *camp*. Generally speaking, there are four clusters of arguments that occur and attract attention: a) the minimal consideration of everyday life, of gay practice in all its forms in Sontag’s essay, b) the definition of *camp* as non-serious, c) Sontag’s rigid relation with the canon, and d) later: her position *vis-à-vis* the crisis provoked by AIDS. The first point results from Sontag’s exclusive deduction of her theory from the social practice of the well-off metropolitan intellectuals, without even thinking about the poor Third World fairies (*locas tercermundistas*, as Lemebel would have said). The second argument, the “dethroning of the serious”, reduces the gay community to an urban group of happy, uncritical, superficial queers: “The camp insistence on not being ‘serious’, on playing, connects also with the homosexual desire to stay young” (Sontag, 1964). Such a proposition becomes evidently obsolete in the face of the vital threat of AIDS, and much more so in “poor” countries. I have already commented on the third point, the rigorous restriction of Sontag’s canon to Western paradigms of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, criticised by some of her compatriots. With reference to Moser, Alessa Dominguez reflects on Susan Sontag’s queer life, stating that she was absolutely unwilling to modify and to expand the gay canon she had proposed decades ago, in 1964:

More than once, Moser situates Sontag’s writing about camp and pop culture alongside feminist and African American attempts to expand the canon. (He doesn’t mention queer theory, which came later). But Sontag herself was against such expansions. (Dominguez, 2019, s. p.)

The most disruptive argument, however, comes from Sontag’s personal position in the AIDS debates, so central to American (gay) discourse at the time. It is worth remembering that the confrontation with AIDS triggered changes in private customs and public discourses, but could not stop new forms of *camp* expression, if we think for example of phenomena such as “The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence”, queer activists, transvestites in nun’s habits, who edited e. g. the first safe sex pamphlet. Their performance (and those of their imitators) can certainly be qualified as *camp*. In other words, AIDS did not make *camp* aesthetics impossible, on the contrary. Nevertheless, one often speaks about a crisis of *camp* towards the end of the millennium, a crisis which may be caused by AIDS. David Bergman states:

Camp finds itself today at a crisis. Many of the social conditions for which camp was an adequate, even successful, response no longer obtain, at last with the same urgency. Most gay people no longer feel the terrible need to hide homosexual communication for fear of blackmail or criminal prosecution. ... Again, camp’s appearance of powerlessness ... is a strategy that the AIDS crisis and organizations such as ACT UP have found to be counterproductive. (Bergman, 1994, p. 106).

For *Camp Grounds*, the 1994 volume containing this article, Bergman had asked Susan Sontag for permission to republish “Notes on Camp”, which she flatly refused. Bergman was unaware that Sontag – a famous critic in

<sup>26</sup> Evita la relación muy directa del término con el mundo gay, y prefiere una asociación por inferencia.

<sup>27</sup> Vivió plenamente su homosexualidad, sin culpa alguna, al tanto de la originalidad que la experiencia excepcional puede significar.

<sup>28</sup> El título del libro [de Sontag] nunca es convincente. A diferencia del cáncer, el sida no llega a ser una metáfora de la corrosión espiritual de la fábrica social.

the meantime – had problems with the article to which she owed a great deal of her reputation. Bergman’s initial disappointment turns positive when he states in his introduction that the essays collected in his volume had strayed far from Sontag’s formula and would consider it inconclusive today. Of course: between 1964 and 1994, the date of Bergman’s book, most gay communities in Europe and the Americas had realised that it was not truly desirable to be defined as shallow, superficial and unserious. And so, some passages in Bergman’s introduction read like a polemic against Sontag’s interpretation. In Esther Newton’s essay “Role Models”, the author uses a sociological method, to ask questions to an informant who is able, by his or her degree of education, to understand Sontag’s essay. The person replies that (s)he is disappointed that Sontag almost excluded homosexuals from her definition of camp (“that she had almost edited homosexuals out of camp”, Newton, 1993, p. 52, n. 12).

Moser reports that the novelist Terry Castle writes about a meeting at Stanford in 1995, where an admirer turned to Sontag, affirming his appreciation of “Notes on Camp”, and of her reluctant reaction. The man was the inventor of the birth control pill. And the narrator clarifies: “She has no interest in discussing that essay and never will” (Moser, 2019, p. 236). Moser, Castley and other critics (such as Philip Lopate or Paul Goodman) use arguments of a personal or psychological nature to explain the rejection of their own theory “because it (i.e. “Notes on camp”) was too obviously queer for the later universally high-minded, sexuality-transcending ‘Susan Sontag’ persona she’d established” (Dominguez, 2019). The psychological thesis means, briefly summarised, that the growing self-perception of a lesbian desire, which already appears in autobiographical notes from 1948, had been suppressed. Sontag thus distances herself from the “homosexual part” implicit in *camp*. Lara Feigel observes: “Without coming out as a lesbian, she’d succeeded in making homosexuality cool and in making herself famous at the same time” (Feigel, 2019, s. p.).

Sontag did not come out of the closet before 2000, in tears, in a meeting with the New Yorker journalist Joan Acocellas, i. e. at a very late stage in her life, and the revelations hardly allow us to speak of a real coming out. The fear of admitting one’s homosexuality (or of identifying with the wider gay community) may be the reason for the subsequent distance from the “Notes on camp”. Moser does not reproach her for the lack of a coming-out (or its very late date), but he places *AIDS and its metaphors* (1989) in a context that did not allow for that very distant voice that predominates throughout the essay. “AIDS activism demanded making the private public, and Sontag’s refusal to do so rendered her voice, for the first time, irrelevant” (Dominguez, 2019)

## 5. José Amícola: *Camp* and Post-avant-gard

In 2000, the Argentinean critic José Amícola published *Camp y posvanguardia*, the first study of the new millennium on *camp*, in which he attempts to take into account the cultural, theoretical and socio-historical developments in the 35 years since the publication of Sontag’s essay, a time span that comprised the Stonewall Riots on Christopher Street in June 1969, the systematic formation of Gender Studies (Foucault, Butler...), of discussions around postmodernity (from Andreas Huyssen and his combination of high culture and popular culture, and Umberto Eco’s study on *Apocalyptic and integrated Intellectuals* with an own theory of *kitsch*), and Linda Hutcheon’s concepts of pastiche and parody, and of *camp* as radical parody or “self-conscious kitsch”. Needless to say, these new tendencies require a reformulation of the concept that culminates, among many others, in a modified definition that Amícola puts in these terms:

*Camp* erects, then, a gaze on manifestations that have been present in attitudes and social discourses in all epochs, but which have only now entered the horizon of perception of an iconoclastic era that is generally called post-modernity. [...] In this sense, *camp* is a new way of looking at reality; its appearance coincides with a current that makes suspicion of tradition – including the avant-garde itself – its touchstone<sup>29</sup> (Amícola, 2000, p. 54)

Two facts are striking: first, Amícola does not include the gay aspect in this definition (despite the general dimensions of his work), and second, he does not refer to the specifically Latin American formula of the neo-baroque, even if the main examples of his following analysis are two Argentinean writers, Manuel Puig and Copi (Raúl Damonte Botana), both outstanding examples of a prototypically neo-baroque gay style. Latin American writings of gay inspiration and within *camp* aesthetics have often been defined by many scholars as neo-baroque (Sarduy, Perlongher, Eco, Krzysztof Kulawik), emphasising both their own character and their overcoming of their colonial tradition. But Amícola’s book dispenses with this term altogether. He replaces neo-baroque for *camp* in order to erect it as a universal principle with very few defining elements, namely its postmodern and iconoclastic character, while he has transferred the whole discussion around *gay camp* back to the footnotes and other argumentative contexts. Amícola postulates that “transvestite staging (...) is not alien to a general enthronement of camp within the dominant culture<sup>30</sup>”

<sup>29</sup> El camp erige, entonces, una mirada sobre manifestaciones que se han dado en las actitudes y en los discursos sociales en todas las épocas, pero que sólo ahora han entrado en el horizonte de percepción de una era iconoclasta que generalmente es llamada posmodernidad. [...] En este sentido, el camp es una forma nueva de ver la realidad; su aparición coincide con una corriente que hace de la sospecha sobre la tradición – incluidas las propias vanguardias – su piedra de toque.

<sup>30</sup> La escenificación travestida (...) no es ajena a una entronización general del camp en la cultura dominante.



(2000, p. 55), so that *camp* loses its transgressive or subversive character to become part of one of the trends of the postmodern culture, especially in its more or less trivial mediatic forms. We thus note a tendency opposed to the line of Gil de Biedma and Monsiváis: while they conceived a (Spanish or Mexican) “nationalisation” of a *camp* tradition, Amicola chooses to treat it as a general, international aesthetic phenomenon, fundamental to the postmodern world (although he continues to demonstrate this with national examples, namely with two Argentineans). This line, which can do without a detailed critique of Sontag, also has (explicit and implicit) successors.

One of the most recent examples is Manuel Guedán’s essay, *Literatura Max Factor: Manuel Puig y los escritores corruptos latinoamericanos* (*Max Factor Literature. Manuel Puig and the corrupt Latin American Writers*, 2018). Guedán detects the consequences of Manuel Puig’s aesthetics – the great paradigm he shares with Amicola – to formulate a “pleasure culture” that “is inscribed in the wake of ‘conscious camp’” (Guedán, 2018, p. 64) which we may understand as *camp* in Sontag’s sense. But at the same time he reinterprets Puig’s role in Latin American literary history, pointing out that Puig was not the poor, downtrodden, corny faggot, but that he occupied a firm and tough position in the cultural/literary business of his time. While, in 2000, Amicola built his theory of *camp* on established authors such as Puig and Copi, Guedán – 18 years later – includes young, contemporary authors such as Dani Umpi and Alejandro López (to name the most *camp*). Speaking of innovations in the field of present-day *camp* creation, we can include, from Argentina, Gabriela Cabezón Cámara with novels such as *La Virgen Cabeza*, full of lesbian *camp*, of systematic transgression of the cultural taboos that make even the concentration camp an object of *camp* (in the novel *Le viste la cara a Dios; You saw God’s face*). In *La Virgen Cabeza*, the two protagonists, Qüity and Cleopatra, a transvestite country wench and a middle-class journalist, are part of “a heterodox romance whose narrative experiments with the resources of camp, melodrama and neo-barroso<sup>31</sup>” according to Guadalupe Maradei’s characterisation.

What about today? Susan Sontag’s question “Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in an age of mass culture?” has become obsolete in the face of a reality in which the internet brings any cultural product immediately into the home of every interested individual. Cabezón Cámara’s books are logically published as e-books. Mass culture itself turns out to be the subject of *camp* – from fascistic military parades to highly anointed religious celebrations, they can be considered as *camp* spectacles. In many cases, *camp* exists in the eye of the beholder, as Thomas B. Hess noted (“Camp exists in the smirk of the beholder”), but not always; in the case of Pierre et Gilles’ photos, *camp* emerges from the gaze of the photographers themselves. Be that as it may, camp has lost its pretence of dandyism and takes itself more seriously than Sontag could have guessed, because, as Wilde already knew: humour is a very serious thing.

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