

From:

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Camp Comforts

Reparative Gay Literature in Times of AIDS

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»Camp Comforts« investigates the wide-ranging impact of camp on AIDS literature and places this impact within two different traditions of camp analysis: a politically subversive one that aims at social change and an aesthetically uplifting one that aims at personal healing. Christian Lassen argues that camp may in fact serve both ends, social change and personal healing, and goes on to explore reparative reading practices in order to rehabilitate alleviation and relief as vital objectives in literary representations of gay grief. In this way, »Camp Comforts« reveals the workings that make camp so crucial a strategy for survival in times of AIDS.

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Camp Comforts

Reparative Gay Literature in Times of AIDS

Camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humour, and theatricality, allows us to witness 'serious' issues with temporary detachment.

– JACK BABUSCIO, “THE CINEMA OF CAMP (AKA CAMP AND THE GAY SENSIBILITY)”

If this is dying, then I don't think much of it.

– LYTTON STRACHEY, *THE LETTERS OF LYTTON STRACHEY*

Some fifteen years ago, in the summer of 1996, a good and much missed friend, when asked about his state of health in the face of his looming death from AIDS, summarised this state with plenty of camp nonchalance: “Nothing much has changed, really; except for my *mucus*. It is a different colour now.” This comic response provoked a wide variety of reactions, ranging from hilarious cries of laughter to irritated displays of incomprehension. Hardly irrelevant or understated, it was still somewhat out of joint with the prescribed medical sensibility. In fact, its first and foremost intent was apparently to mock medical sensibility, seeing that the response tried for the apt medical terminology, using *mucus* rather than *spit*, only then to playfully detach the much scrutinised matter of *mucus* from the assumed authority of medi-

cine altogether and to bring it, in a move both comic and still noticeably coquettish, within the sphere of aesthetics instead.

Irreverent responses to disorders, diseases and death are still widely seen as distasteful or even offensive. The reasons for this appear to be deeply rooted in Western culture. In fact, the anecdote outlined above seems to confirm what Adrienne Christensen and Jeremy Hanson assert in an article called “Comedy as Cure for Tragedy: ACT UP and the Rhetoric of AIDS,” namely that to the very extent that “individuals or groups act in the comic frame, they commit themselves to an approach that runs counter to the prevailing tragic impulse in Western society” (Christiansen and Hanson 161). And still, the need to counteract and disempower this tragic impulse hints at an alternative both possible and liberating, especially in times of AIDS, for “[r]ather than reducing social tensions through mystification, scapegoating, or banishment, rhetoric in the comic frame humorously points out failings in the status quo and urges society to correct them through thoughtful action rather than tragic victimage” (ibid.). The article, then, highlights examples of how AIDS activism, and specifically the activist group ACT-UP, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, has used camp extensively to cause a storm of protest and to draw attention to the disease and to the innumerable casualties and losses it has brought about. ACT-UP member Jim Serafini, for example, explains his need for camp in this extract from Paul Taylor’s “AIDS guerrillas,” quoted in Christiansen and Hanson:

“Faced with the prospect of one’s mortality, a lot of us have gained an ironic sense of humor. We’ve lived in a death-drenched community for ten years, and to keep our sanity, we’ve had to joke – as well as raise hell. So what if people think we are going over the top? We can see the profound absurdity of our situation and laugh at it.” (Christiansen and Taylor 161)

Serafini’s account is exceptional in that it shows a notion of camp, this “ironic sense of humor,” that is at once subversive and restorative or, as the discussion will shortly explain in the terms coined by Eve Sedgwick, paranoid and reparative (ibid.).¹ Camp, as Serafini’s state-

1 As Sedgwick’s distinction between paranoid and reparative reading practices is of particular relevance for the entire analysis, it seems useful to suspend the debate for a moment and to briefly sketch her line of reasoning

ment reveals, aims at both social change, seeing that it helps AIDS victims and AIDS activists raise hell, and personal healing, seeing that, in no less significant or acute a role, it helps them keep their sanity. It can therefore be observed to operate through two different modes: a subversive one that seeks to anticipate the social workings of a heteronormative regime of regulatory power, thereby aiming at familiar objectives such as denaturalisation, demystification and exposure and a restorative one that strives for personal wellbeing, emotional stability and mental sanity, thereby pursuing the retrieval of relief, consolation and healing as the psychological resources that counteract the exhausting impact of constant anticipation. Wilfully offensive and, at times,

here. With her distinction, Sedgwick encourages nothing less than a reassessment of our epistemological positions that seeks to balance out coexisting forms of knowledge, i.e. the paranoid and the reparative. In current scholarship, she argues, paranoia has by now assumed an obligatory stance, seeing that it underlies all possible projects of demystification, denaturalisation and exposure. As such, paranoia has turned out to be a feasible analytic tool, albeit one that has certain drawbacks: paranoia is anticipatory, in that it triggers a state of permanent alertness in which nothing must ever be deemed unthinkable. Paranoia is reflexive and mimetic, in that it seeks to pre-empt every possible threat that lies ahead. Paranoia is a strong theory that increases with the quantity of the experiences it comprises and with the intensity of its exhausting anticipations. Paranoia is a negative affect that only ever stimulates and nurtures our fears, concerns and worries. And eventually, paranoia confides in exposure, even as exposure is not equivalent to change and, hence, ever so often a venture undertaken in vain – and at great costs. Reparation, by contrast, sets out to satisfy another set of affects. Frequently misread as apolitical, aestheticising, or even naive, its principle aim is to recover psychological resources that assemble relief and comfort in abundance and confer them on the subject that knows how to indulge in such reparative psychological resources, or better: that knows how to extract from them the greatest possible benefit. Juxtaposing paranoid and reparative reading practices, Sedgwick appeals to a rehabilitation of the latter. Regarding camp, this appeal turns out to be of particular importance, since it allows for an interpretation of camp that finally acknowledges the fact that this phenomenon can be motivated by both the need for social change *and* the need for personal healing. (cf. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 130-51).

even distasteful, “ACT-UP’s theatrical manoeuvres [and other irreverent responses to AIDS] make deliberate use of camp to effect debate and criticism and are a reflection on and reaction against the horrors of the AIDS crisis over the past decade[s]” (Lucas 122). In other words, better justice would be done to the overall intent of this comic relief, i.e. camp, if it is understood that “the seemingly incongruous, indeed audacious, pairing of AIDS and humor need not run counter to a politics of representation set forth by AIDS and / or gay activists” (Román 206). AIDS activism, it follows, has long recognised and realised the representational dynamite that works through camp and its subversive and restorative practices.

Turning from activism to art, the prolific impact of camp on the AIDS discourse can be seen to grow even more irreverent – and controversial. The 1989 exhibition *Against Nature*, for example, advocated, as the name of the art show unquestionably suggested, an approach to representing AIDS that favoured an aesthetically detached and markedly artificial response to the disease rather than an activist one.² Canadian filmmaker John Greyson recapitulates the aim of this exhibition, stating that

“the curators sought to reclaim [dandyism], seeking work that referenced AIDS from the ironic, campy perspective of latter-day dandies. They looked for stuff that was biting, bitchy, irreverent, self-consciously decorative, elegiac, impolite, bad boy, and certainly not ‘politically correct,’ whatever this insidious phrase means.” (Greyson 136)

Seeking to circumvent the appeal to social and political representations of AIDS in order to emphasise an expressly gay investment in surplus artistic decorum and opulence instead, the art show, according to Greyson, “intended to insist on the relevance of a particular fag sensibility in combating the AIDS crisis,” thus explicitly relocating camp in an exclusively aesthetic sphere of representation (Greyson 136). In fact, *Against Nature* initially materialised as “a response to the emer-

2 The title of this exhibition obviously refers to Joris-Karl Huysmans’ novel *Against Nature*, or *A Rebours*, the ultimate portrait of the dandy *par excellence*, des Esseintes, whose extravagant tastes in the realm of aesthetics (and elsewhere) have contributed to the book’s notorious reputation as the epitome of literary decadence.

gence in 1987 of activist AIDS art, as typified by artists' collectives in New York like Gran Fury, Testing the Limits, and various ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) artists" (ibid.). Moreover, it did so in spite of the fact that "the show did end up including works that certainly referenced the political and social experience of gay men and AIDS" (Greyson 136-7). Notwithstanding its dissimilar agenda, then, *Against Nature* illustrates that AIDS art, no less than AIDS activism, also calls comprehensively upon the representational dynamite camp has in store.

The controversy surrounding *Against Nature* marks a crucial milestone with regard to the artistic response to AIDS – in more ways than one. First of all, the exhibition exemplifies the dispute that arose from two severely divergent modes of artistic representation, i.e. the art of the activists and the art of the aesthetes, as both insistently compete for authority in matters of AIDS. The former as a variation of *littérature engagée* that attempts to emphasise the political and social impact of AIDS, the latter as a return to the notion of *l'art pour l'art* that seeks to approach and confront AIDS from a purely aesthetic angle, both modes appear at first to be all but incompatible, if not downright irreconcilable. As Greyson himself flamboyantly contends, "[f]ags everywhere feel the absolute necessity of responding to this viral holocaust, but we disagree about the aesthetic and political strategies that are appropriate. We especially disagree about what we variously mean by aesthetics and politics" (Greyson 137). Yet the immediacy of the common cause, the fight against AIDS, has led to a closing of ranks between both agitprop and aesthetics, that is to say between the activists and the artists, since, as Greyson eventually concludes:

"Our motivations for making art about AIDS are as diverse as our sexual, regional, racial, and political identities, but they are all rooted in the absolute terms of this very present moment. We make AIDS art to heal, to mourn, to rage, to engage, to change. It is often as much for ourselves, our friends, our lovers, as it is for our communities and our publics. It is hardly a surprise that our cultural production is addressing our experience of AIDS. Indeed, it would be shocking if our response were any less urgent, vital, and voluminous." (Greyson 135)

Arising from this cultural production and its numerous reactions to the cause of AIDS is a response that is diverse by necessity, as well as in-

dependent and interventionist. And therefore, “[w]hat is also not surprising is that an urgent, vital, and voluminous critical debate has accompanied this production, on the one hand dissecting mass cultural constructions of AIDS and its effects and, on the other hand, interrogating the various expressions of artists addressing the crisis” (Greyson 135-6). Overcoming their political and aesthetic differences, activists and artists have thus come to acknowledge the diversity of their response to AIDS.

Secondly, Serafini’s account and the outline of *Against Nature* indicate that both, activism and art, count on an intense investment in camp as a means of confronting AIDS, precisely because camp may serve to express and support the whole range of motivations that Greyson deems vital for the stimulation of AIDS art, i.e. healing, mourning, rage, engagement and change. In fact, the discussion has already shown that camp may bring together objectives as diverse as social change and personal healing: objectives, that is, that themselves originate from claims as divergent as the activists’ call for agitprop and the artists’ call for aesthetics. (As an aside, the urgent and pressing needs for both social change *and* personal healing, however dissonantly emphasised or expressed, clearly point to needs that are all but universal or unifying in times of AIDS, thus revealing targets shared by both activists as well as artists.) One remarkable example for a camp response to AIDS, then, is provided by Greyson himself whose contribution to the catalogue of *Against Nature* comprises some preliminary sketches for a fake video script that he later adapted for the screen, thereby directing what has come to be regarded as a highly acclaimed musical comedy about the beginnings of HIV and AIDS in North America: *Zero Patience*. As such, it marks an excellent sample of and a starting point for a discussion that investigates the impact of camp on AIDS literature and AIDS art.

***Zero Patience* and the Use of Camp in the AIDS Discourse**

Celebrated by activists and artists alike, Greyson’s *Zero Patience* first and foremost attempts a camp revision of earlier representations depicting the spread of AIDS in North America, especially Randy Shilts’ novelistic pseudo-documentary *And The Band Played On* that claims to objectively centre on the CDC cluster study that proved HIV to be

sexually transmitted, even as it notoriously comes to blame a gay French-Canadian flight attendant, Gaeton Dugas, alias Patient Zero, for the inexorable spread of the epidemic. Greyson's musical *Zero Patience* opposes delineations that – even as reliable reports “paint him as misinformed and regretful” – portray Dugas as “the very Dracula of AIDS [...] who flits from coast to coast at ‘breakneck’ speed, remorselessly spreading the strange foreign illness of the blood” (Hanson 332).³ Seeking to exonerate Zero (Normand Fauteux), Greyson gives his protagonist a voice to tell, indeed to sing, his version of *his-story*. Starting with a water-ballet sequence, in the style of Esther Williams, Zero, now a ghost, prepares for his return to the world of the living, a return that, of all places, leads him directly into the Jacuzzi of a gay bathhouse in Toronto. His first song “Tell a story, save a life, just like Scheherazade,” performed in a sexy nothing of a bathing suit, playfully alludes to the CDC cluster study whose procedures demanded that Zero relate the intimate details of his promiscuous sex life. One story a night is what saved Scheherazade. It will not save Zero who is dead already, visible only to one other character. And yet, in imagining himself as Scheherazade, Zero has chosen a suitable self-fashioning, seeing that the one man who actually can see and hear him is no less than Richard Burton – that is Sir Richard Francis Burton (John Robinson) – the Victorian polymath whose interests, among others, included orientalism, sexology and linguistics, and whose distinctive erudition has given us the translations of *The Book of One Thousand Nights and a Night*, hence Scheherazade, and of the *Kama Sutra*, as well as some other enquiries that, according to Wendy Gay Pearson, “notoriously centred around questions of sexuality – in particular [...] his studies of penis size, his investigations of Asian brothels and practices of homosexuality, and his ‘Sotadic Zone’ theory that sodomy could only flour-

3 Shilts indeed goes as far as to propagate the sensational ‘fact’ that “*rumours* began on Castro Street about a strange guy at the Eighth and Howard bathhouse, a blond with a French accent.” According to Shilts, “[h]e [that is Dugas, by implication,] would have sex with you, turn up the lights in the cubicle, and point out his Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions. ‘I’ve got gay cancer,’ he’d say. ‘I’m going to die and so are you.’” (*And the Band Played On* 165, emphasis added) Among others, this passage has particularly contributed to the infamous reputation *And the Band Played On* has gained among both an academic and a non-academic readership.

ish in warm climates” (Pearson, “Queer Genealogy” 81). In the movie, Sir Richard, alias Dick, is still alive, due to a fateful dip in the Fountain of Youth that has prolonged his existence ad infinitum. Nevertheless, having grown up in “The Culture of Certainty” – the title of his opening song in the musical – this leopard definitely can’t change its spots. Working as a taxidermist in a Toronto museum, Sir Richard still meticulously strives for scientific accuracy, collecting documentary evidence for an ambitious project, the ‘Hall of Contagion’: an exhibition on the world’s most fatal pandemics. Things are not going too well for Sir Richard who is being denied his most treasured exhibit, the Düsseldorf plague rat, due to budget cuts. Hoping to make up for this loss, he is now striving to tell the definitive history of AIDS from its supposedly African origins to its global spread, thus planning to make Zero the showpiece of his project – a showpiece that, moreover, is to be commercially exploited in a shrill music clip sponsored by a pharmaceutical company tellingly called Gilbert and Sullivan. Worse still for Zero, Sir Richard does not even shrink from rearranging the facts so as to present his project in the most spectacular manner, thereby fiercely manipulating and misrepresenting interviews with Zero’s mother (Charlotte Boisjoli), his doctor (Brenda Kamino) and his former airline colleague (Dianne Heatherington). Nevertheless, even as Sir Richard goes about discrediting the powerless Zero, who is invisible and inaudible to everyone but the taxidermist, he is all the while struggling with his homosexual panic and the fact that he has developed a crush on his own showpiece. Eventually, Sir Richard experiences an epiphany. While he and Zero are looking at an old blood sample from the latter under a microscope, they make the acquaintance of the virus itself in the form of Miss HIV (Michael Callen) whose drag act makes two things perfectly clear: first of all, the attribution of blame with regard to the spread of AIDS is not only infamous but downright impossible seeing that the transmission path is ultimately untraceable (and incubation time unpredictable), so that even an ostensibly scientific project scapegoating Zero is deprived of its credibility; and secondly, that this callous attribution of blame, apart from being infamous and impossible, thwarts the path to an immensely more significant and consolatory project, namely mourning. While Sir Richard reflects on these newly-gained insights and plans the ensuing rehabilitation of Zero as a cooperative participant in the cluster study rather than a death-dealing vampire, Miss HIV splashes some drops of blood

up the microscope, as if the latter were a blood vessel. The blood turns into water and, as it sprinkles into Zero's eyes, he becomes visible on the video screen, only just long enough to tell his story and clear his name. From this moment on, Sir Richard does all he can to revise his first project and to paint a more accurate picture of Zero. But alas, he fails to complete the revision in time for the opening night of the exhibition and, due to the inflexibility of the museum's curator, the unrevised version of the project is put on display all the same. Fed up and frustrated, Zero decides to quit his spectral existence. Lighting a cigarette, he deliberately sets off the fire alarm system. Its sprinkler ultimately destroys the video tape. Thus Zero fades away for good.

Zero Patience, then, campily takes on the beginnings of the discursive debate on AIDS in North America, illustrating how the naming of Gaeton Dugas as Patient Zero has revealed, apart from a readiness to slander, the inclination to regionalise, sexualise and, more generally, to 'other' the disease, even to the extent that AIDS has developed into the disease of the other, no matter whether this other is a foreign species or a sexual pervert, the African green monkey, a French-Canadian flight attendant, a promiscuous gay man, or any number of these at once.⁴ At

4 In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag points out that "[f]rom the beginning the construction of the illness had depended on notions that separated one group of people from another – the sick from the well, people with ACR from people with AIDS, them and us [...]" (Sontag, *AIDS* 31). Moreover, Sontag specifies that AIDS has been both sexualised, as when she argues that "[t]he sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means – especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity," and regionalised, as when she identifies another "feature of the usual script for the plague: the disease invariably comes from somewhere else. [...]" But what may seem like a joke about the inevitability of chauvinism reveals a more important truth: that there is a link between imagining disease and imagining foreignness. [...] Thus, illustrating the classic script for plague, AIDS is thought to have started in the 'dark continent,' then spread to Haiti, then to the United States and to Europe [...]" (Sontag, *AIDS* 26 and 47-51) Sontag's examination of the metaphors of AIDS, then, brilliantly demonstrates how a particularising discourse has successfully turned AIDS into the disease of the 'other.'

the same time, *Zero Patience* comes to expose the double bind between a particularising and a universalising staging of the virus, for it shows that the multiple othering processes at work in the AIDS discourse have not saved Zero, the flight attendant with a deadly global mission, from being depicted as a vampire and a serial killer whose promiscuous insatiability threatens to contaminate humanity with apocalyptic effects.⁵ Despite the gravity of this double bind, however, *Zero Patience* represents the discursive beginnings of the AIDS debate in a manner of excess eccentricity whose camp objectives demand artistic detachment rather than a factual report. What is more, in so doing the movie actually comes to question the established facts. According to Douglas Crimp, then,

“[w]hat might seem wildly eccentric in *Zero Patience* is in fact strategic. That the story’s protagonists are a ghost and a nineteenth-century figure still alive in the present; that their story is told through musical numbers that include a pair of singing assholes, a song-and-dance performance whose characters are animals from the natural history museum’s dioramas suddenly sprung to life, and an HIV virus portrayed by Michael Callen in drag and singing falsetto in a Busby Berkeley-style routine seen through a microscope – what could more fully alert us to the *artifice*, the *invention* of this version of the Patient Zero story?” (Crimp, “Randy Shilts’s Miserable Failure” 127)

Zero Patience thus irreverently denies any truth claims regarding a definitive history of AIDS, let alone its origin or spread. Rather, the film reveals the two camp objectives outlined above, namely social change,

5 In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick pinpoints this double bind between a particularising and a universalising staging of AIDS, with special reference to homosexuality. According to her, its gravity will only be adequately understood, or grasped, if one attempts to realise the no-win situation caused by the “double bind of definition between the homosexual [...] as a distinct *risk group*, and the homosexual as a potential of representation within the universal” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 130). This double bind, then, simultaneously supports a particularising point of view, one which encourages the idea that AIDS is essentially a ‘gay disease,’ and a universalising point of view, one which attempts to implant universal anxieties over species extinction and, in spite of that, still seeks to blame gay men for bringing disaster upon the entire human race.

given that it tries to counter blame-inspired discussions of the disease, and personal healing, given that the generic range of the film, first of all its musical numbers, presents a comic and tuneful potpourri that has all the makings for a feel-good movie.⁶ In fact, just how useful a subversive and restorative strategy camp has become can be discerned from a closer look at the concept of the film, whose musical-comedy style can be seen to engage in an activist commitment that denounces the social and political grievances resulting from the public treatment of HIV and AIDS during the first decade of the epidemic, even as it allows for an explicitly gay (or queer) investment in aesthetics, characteristic of the ‘fag sensibility’. Therefore, the camp tone of the movie can be seen to tackle some of the most urgent aspects that arise from the advent of AIDS, three of which shall be granted particular attention here, as they determine the further course of this study: first of all, the medico-ethical confrontation of public healthcare, as referenced in camp representations of nursing and caring; secondly, the literary and psychological confrontation of loss, as referenced in camp representations of the elegy; and finally, the meta-fictional confrontation of classic camp narratives, as referenced in representations of a camp cultural memory.

In terms of public healthcare, *Zero Patience* offers some harsh and insightful criticism, attacking members of both the medical profession and the drug industry whose commercial interests, made manifest in

6 In his article “*Zero Patience*, Genre, Difference, and Ideology: Singing and Dancing Queer Nation,” Christopher Gittings thus rightfully contends that “Greyson locates the deconstructive narrative of *Patience Zero* in the matrices of the Hollywood musical, horror and documentary genres” (Gittings 29). The latter has already been discussed with regard to the corrective concern of *Zero Patience* whose mock documentary style is widely seen as a response to publications like *And the Band Played On*. Of the remaining, then, the Hollywood musical is of particular significance to this discussion, seeing that, even though, according to Jack Babuscio, both genres, the musical comedy as well as the horror movie, are “saturated with camp,” it is the latter, the musical comedy, “with its high budgets and big stars, its open indulgence in sentiment, and its emphasis on atmosphere, mood, nostalgia, and the fantastic,” that best exemplifies the correlation of subversive and restorative resources in camp as it occurs in *Zero Patience* (Babuscio 122).

the ready funding of the Hall-of-Contagion video clip, contribute to their already compromised priorities and, moreover, their ruthless exploitation of the sick. The name of the pharmaceutical company, Gilbert and Sullivan, is thus telling in more ways than one. As the writers of comic operas, librettist W.S. Gilbert and composer Arthur Sullivan certainly qualify as camp icons. In fact, the playfulness of their musical arrangements, the spell of their exotic settings as well as the opulence of their extravagant investment in costumes, makeup and art decoration in famous works such as *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Mikado*, for example, have stimulated enthusiastic responses in camp perceivers ever since their first production. Simultaneously however, *Zero Patience* tellingly (and rightfully) relocates the present-day embodiment of these camp icons, that is to say the pharmaceutical company with the name of Gilbert and Sullivan, in the cultural vicinity of Sir Richard, so that this company, just like the taxidermist himself, is revealed to share the mindset of the late-Victorian period whose belief in (the culture of) certainty, allegedly benevolent and yet heavily compromised, only ever provides answers that are scientific, if inhumane, and efficient, if utterly calculated. According to Gittings, whose interests again mainly concern references to Hollywood musicals, John Greyson's intertextual flirtation with the musical-comedy genre is therefore "part parody, part homage;" and nonetheless, his "musical travels beyond homage [...] to hail / recruit queer subjects to take part in activist politics directed against multinational pharmaceutical corporations and their commercial exploitation of the AIDS epidemic" (Gittings 30-1). The powerful correlation between camp's subversive and restorative resources is perhaps nowhere more concisely and forcefully expressed as in this interplay that at once marks a tribute to the musical-comedy genre and a charge against the healthcare system.

In terms of loss, *Zero Patience* continues to make exorbitant use of the camp potential intrinsic to the musical-comedy genre. Garish choreography in a crowded swimming-pool – that is in Zero's blood sample, packed with actors dressed up as free-floating T cells, viruses and corpuscles wearing lifesavers in signal colours – culminates in a drag act performed by a diva in a very décolleté dress: Miss HIV. Her message, vigorously put forward in a falsetto voice, is loud and clear. She urges Zero to "[t]ell the story of a virus, / Of greed, ambition, and fear; / A case of science gone bad. / Tell a tale of friends we miss, / A tale that's cruel and sad. / Weep for me, Scheherazade. / Weep for me,

Scheherazade.” Miss HIV thus successfully shifts the focus of attention from blame to mourning. Her plea to weep is enhanced, quite subtly, by her splashing up blood from the sample into Zero’s eyes. The stream that fills his eyes, however, looks like water and – considering where it comes from, namely a swimming pool – *is* water, so that this liquid is in fact a blend that, at once, represents the blood from the sample, the water from the gay bathhouses – and Zero’s own tears. Excessively melodramatic, Miss HIV’s sissy move virtually showers Zero’s face with this delicate liquid, thus marking the only time in the film that Zero becomes visible and audible to someone else other than Sir Richard. In a manner characteristic of camp overstatement, this scene shows the need for both the visualisation as well as the articulation of gay grief and mourning. At no point, however, is *Zero Patience* at risk of following in the time-honoured footsteps of the conventional elegy. If anything, the idea of transcendence, so vital to conventional pastoral-elegiac melodramas, is pushed beyond tears, for Zero, we are to assume, gladly returns to his surrogate heaven – the water-ballet nexus – an Elysium that is equivalent to the pastoral, even as it campily exceeds it. Regarding loss, *Zero Patience* engages in a critique of traditional, often deeply melodramatic, representations of grief. Exploring the comic frame in search of new ways to encourage the expression of gay mourning, it again finds artistic support in the musical-comedy genre whose resourceful campiness makes room for subtle elegiac needs, even as it articulates these needs in a wilfully unsubtle manner.

In terms of the classic narratives of camp, *Zero Patience* again employs the generic possibilities of the musical comedy, as when some resurrected exhibits, predominantly jungle animals, begin to dance and to present in their midst a chain-smoking African green monkey (Marla Lukofsky) that is unwilling to take the blame for the spread of the AIDS epidemic. Fed-up and outraged, it accuses the taxidermist of distorting historical facts and, furthermore, of naturalising his distortions with the truth claims of scientific credibility. *Zero Patience* thus exonerates the silenced and the dead. They may tell their own truths and voice their individual histories; histories, that is to say, that run counter to the narratives of dominant history whose unreliability tends to be disavowed in a culture of certainty. And yet, in so doing *Zero Patience* also reflects on the camp classics – the MGM musicals, the choreographies of Busby Berkeley and the water-ballet revues of

Esther Williams – in order to examine them in the act of their restaging.

This brief analysis of *Zero Patience* already shows that the chief objectives of this study lie in the examination of representations of care, loss and camp meta-fictions in times of AIDS. However, before the discussion proceeds to a more detailed introduction of these issues, it is necessary to turn to camp itself and to sketch both its history and its strategic distributions.

A Turbulent History of Camp and Its Strategic Distributions

The reading of *Zero Patience* exemplifies how camp has reassimilated and reinvented itself so as to meet the challenge of AIDS; how it has revitalized its strategies to deal with its effects. As Caryl Flinn stresses, then, “AIDS [and other impacts] have certainly *reconfigured* camp, but they have not killed it” (Flinn 454). Reversing the angle slightly, one may as well deduce that AIDS has revived camp in ways that reconfigure and, hence, reinvest and reassemble it. To understand how camp has come to provide strategies for both subversion and restoration, social change and personal healing, it seems useful to shortly outline its turbulent history here, a history that has many variables and that nevertheless features two fundamentally opposed, yet deeply affiliated constants: paranoia and reparation.

Etymologically, the term *camp* makes its lexical debut in English in J. Redding Ware’s *Passing English of the Victorian Era*, first published in 1909, where it is said to designate “actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. Probably from the French. Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character,” thereby introducing camp as a “*street*” adjective whose references to a newly identified species, the homosexual, are hard to miss (Ware 61).⁷ Academic interest in the

7 Incidentally, it has to be added that Mark Booth’s study *Camp*, first published in 1983, seeks to trace the French roots of the term *camp*, positing that it was originally a military expression. In a chapter tellingly called “*Campe-Toi!*: On the Origins and Definitions of Camp,” Booth discusses Théophile Gautier’s *Capitaine Fracasse*, “an elaborate and witty spoof on the Romantic novel, written in a lush, decadent style that he created as a pastiche of *préciosité*” (Booth 33). He points out that “Gautier is appar-

phenomenon began in the 1950s and 1960s and, it has to be said, ever since then scholars and critics have failed to come up with an ultimate definition, more often than not apologising for the hopelessness of their doomed enterprise in advance. Instead, it may be better to admit, as Ian Lucas does, that “once you start dissecting the nature of camp, you’re left with individual parts and no whole” (Lucas 114). Rather than trying for a definition of camp, the phenomenon may thus best be explained by an analysis of its strategic distribution; and therefore, camp has to be seen in the light of its disparate aesthetic and political agendas.

Aesthetically, camp performances and perceptions are customarily considered to snub content in favour of style, hence answering demands for seriousness with artistic detachment. In *The World in the Evening*, published in 1954, Christopher Isherwood opens the aesthetic debate on camp via a mock-Socratic dialogue that illustrates camp by means of many examples. Isherwood locates camp’s relation to seriousness and detachment in the highbrow distinction between low and high camp, arguing that the latter expresses “what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance,” so that camp, and here Isherwood seems at his best, is in fact believed to always retain an irreducible seriousness, displaced into fun, artifice and elegance (Isherwood 125).

More influential than Isherwood’s highbrow inauguration of camp aesthetics, however, are Susan Sontag’s pioneering “Notes on Camp,” first published in 1964. Like Isherwood, Sontag makes extensive use of examples to support her observations, ranging, for instance, from Aubrey Beardsley’s paintings to Oscar Wilde’s comedies, from Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* to Schoedsack’s *King Kong*, and from tacky Tiffany lamps to the rococo churches of Munich. However, Sontag’s contribution to camp discourse is perhaps best known for its maxims that, even as they largely focus on the aesthetic motivation of camp, provide some relevant insights into the workings of this extravagant

ently using *se camper* [...] with the associations of an army camp. *Se camper* is to present oneself in an expansive but flimsy manner (like a tent), with overtones here of theatricality, vanity, dressiness, and provocation. Tracing the origin of this sense of *se camper*,” Booth goes on to conclude “provides a valuable signpost to the origin of the whole phenomenon” (ibid.).

phenomenon. According to Sontag, then, “[c]amp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.” (Sontag, “Notes on Camp” 277) Continuing the theme, she states that “[t]o emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical.” (Ibid.) Regarding its relation to the serious, Sontag takes up a somewhat more rigid stance than Isherwood, seeing that, according to her, “[t]he 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 “Notes on Camp” 288) Eventually, one may well suggest that Sontag, by slighting the political aspects of a camp interrogation of the serious, arrives at a view on the phenomenon that highlights its restorative resources, even as it does not spell them out distinctly. In her closing notes she thus comes to assert that

“Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgement. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it’s not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.) [...]

Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of ‘character’ ... Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ‘a camp’, they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.” (Sontag, “Notes on Camp” 291-2)

Might one go as far as to say that, in a Wildean streak, camp loves the things it kills? Perhaps. This mode of camp, the restorative one, enjoys, appreciates, and even identifies with the things it mocks. It is an identification with beauty, knowing that life can be ugly; an identification with hope, knowing that life can be full of despair; and an identification with comic relief, knowing that life can be full of tragic flaws. So if camp does display a degree of cynicism, sweet rather than ruthless, it is to shield an all too tender feeling and an all too vulnerable longing from a cultural disregard that is hostile to its cultivation. *In short, this mode of camp is a melancholy sentiment that refuses to be melancholic or sentimental* – unless in ways so frivolous, flamboyant,

and *kitschy*, that they do not count and, consequently, do not need to be accounted for, so that melancholia and sentimentality re-materialise in a comic rather than tragic, and for all that no less socially and culturally ostracised, frame. What is also true, however, is that Isherwood and Sontag, as well as their various successors, do not account for a motivation of camp other than aesthetics. The most vital point of critique therefore concentrates on their neglect of camp's political potential. As Ian Lucas points out, "Sontag's liberalization of [the] camp tradition and her overemphasis on style misreads camp's encoded criticisms, and negates its mercurial energy" (Lucas 115). Reclaiming political content, Lucas' reading of Sontag explains that "[w]hat has been misread in camp is its subversiveness, its use of subterfuge," thus voicing a criticism that values Sontag's essay on camp aesthetics, even as it considers it one-sided, or rather, incomplete (*ibid.*).

Politically, camp has in the meantime turned into an efficient deconstructivist strategy whose aim lies in the denaturalisation, demystification and exposure of (hetero-)normativity, mainly in terms of gender and gay-related issues. Regarding gender, the political deployment of camp begins with a sociological study, namely Esther Newton's influential *Mother Camp*, first published in 1972, that researches the lives of female impersonators and, in this manner, comes to examine one of the most significant manifestations of camp: drag. In the aftermath of Newton's study, camp drag acts have inspired the project of probing prevalent gender roles, frequently using these drag acts to posit and illustrate the performativity of gender and, hence, the possibility of its theatrical and artificial annexation. And indeed, this project has benefited immensely from the deployment of drag, seeing that its advocates, most notably Judith Butler, have come to enforce the view that heteronormativity itself cannot but fail to successfully enact its gender taxonomies, owing to the simple fact that "there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of imitation itself" (Butler, "Imitation" 21). Butler's essay, first published in 1991, thus marks the onset of an impressive and influential body of work whose employment of camp drag acts shows that camp is a powerful concept when it comes to a political interrogation of normative gender stereotypes.

Regarding gay issues, camp (like the gay lingo *polari*) has traditionally been regarded as a secret code and, in the aftermath of gay liberation, as a subcultural glue indispensable to community formation and community survival. Camp thus works as a dissident strategy that, similar to its function in the gender debate, mainly serves to denaturalise, demystify and expose the workings of an oppressive heteronormative regime. In one of his earlier publications, “It’s being so camp as keeps us going,” first published in 1977, Richard Dyer comes to emphasise the significance of camp as a social glue, asserting that camp “gives you a tremendous sense of identification and belonging” (Dyer, “It’s being so camp as keeps us going” 110). However, arising from this sense of identification is a drive to political action, or at least to dissidence, since “[i]dentity, togetherness, fun and wit, self-protection and thorns in the flesh of straight society – these are the pulses of camp” (Dyer, “It’s being so camp as keeps us going” 111). Representations like this one which view camp as *the* gay sensibility continue to this very day, with some minor or major modifications. In *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, for instance, Moe Meyer defines camp “as the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity” (Meyer 5). On the one hand, Meyer’s intention is to make a wider use of camp as “a queer label [that] contains a critique of a more vast and comprehensive system of class-based practices of which sex / gender identity is only a part;” on the other hand, he attempts to forestall a possible “un-queer appropriation of queer practices [via pop culture] whose purpose [...] is the enfusement of the un-queer with the queer area, acting to stabilize the ontological challenge of Camp through a dominant gesture of reincorporation.” (Meyer 3-5). Apart from an attempted modification of camp, that is to say its transition from gay to queer, Meyer thus also demonstrates, if somewhat involuntarily, that the political deployment of camp more often than not shows strong paranoid tendencies that develop from the admissible fear of a normative, in this case pop-cultural, invasion of camp whose aim is to tame its subterfuge. And indeed: this fear, precisely because it is admissible (and reasonable within Meyer’s logic), now threatens to fuel a mental state prone to permanent alertness as well as exhausting anticipations.⁸

8 A closer look at Meyer’s line of reasoning, of course, still raises the question of whether or not the integration of camp into pop culture is at all un-

One of the most incisive texts to consult on the workings of camp's political deployment is Jonathan Dollimore's chapter "Post/modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert's Revenge on Authenticity," taken from his book *Sexual Dissidence*, first published in 1991. Acknowledging camp's diversity, Dollimore first makes clear that he is concerned

"with that mode of camp which undermines the categories which exclude it, and does so through parody and mimicry. But not from the outside: this kind of camp undermines the depth model of identity from inside, being a kind of parody and mimicry which hollows out from within, making depth recede into its surfaces. Rather than a direct repudiation of depth, there is a performance of it to excess: depth is undermined by being taken to and beyond its own limits." (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 310-1)

Dollimore, not unlike Judith Butler, also emphasises the imitative strategies intrinsic to camp, its "transgressive reinscriptions," so that he arrives at a conception of the phenomenon as one that attempts to initiate subversion and change from the inside, through mimicry and parody, rather than from the outside, through repudiation and opposi-

desirable, especially since Meyer himself attempts to reintroduce an elitist distinction between a highbrow and by implication 'homosexual' notion of Camp (with a capital letter) and a lowbrow and by implication 'heterosexual' notion of camp (uncapitalised), thereby blaming Susan Sontag for exposing camp to the vulgar and apolitical invasions of pop culture. Thus, it may turn out that Meyer's view on queerness is itself intensely *un-queer*, since, as Fabio Cleto points out, "the reclaiming of a gay exclusiveness [...] means reasserting, although with a shift between the two terms, one replacing the other, the logic of the original/originary – gay 'Camp' being the primary, original formation, and heterosexual 'Pop camp' being the secondary, the rough copy, the fake reproduction organic to Capital and to bourgeois ideology – inscribed in that very (bourgeois) order that queer (money, subjectivity, epistemology) *queers*." (Cleto 19) The reassertion of this logic of the original/originary, however, is in fact counterproductive, if not utterly reactionary, for, "[i]n excluding the complex relation of camp to the phenomenology of pop and Kitsch," so Cleto, "Meyer's straightened 'queer' excludes one of the radical implications of the queer unsettling strategies" (ibid.)

tion (cf. Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 307-25). In contrast to Butler, however, Dollimore comes up with a less gender-specific investigation of camp's political potential, one that, more generally, relocates camp in the sphere of the comic frame and that, in effect, makes the dissident practices of this frame, i.e. mimicry and parody, viable for larger projects of political subversion and social change. Like one of those irritating fun house mirrors, camp excessively produces imperfect imitations, deliberately, defiantly and with great delight, all the while knowing and showing that "[t]he hollowing-out of the deep self is pure pleasure, a release from the subjective correlatives of dominant morality (normality, authenticity, etc.)" (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 311). It is therefore also to the credit of Dollimore's analysis that camp, perhaps for the first time, is able to strategically reconcile both its subversive and restorative resources.

In terms of subversion, Dollimore claims that camp is a strong sensibility that is strong not so much on its own account, but because it exposes the weakness of other sensibilities:

"Camp [...] negotiates some of the lived contradictions of subordination, simultaneously refashioning as a weapon of attack an oppressive identity inherited as subordination, and hollowing out dominant formations responsible for that identity in the first instance. So it is misleading to say that camp *is* the gay sensibility; camp is an invasion and subversion of other sensibilities, and works via parody, pastiche, and exaggeration." (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 311)

According to Dollimore, camp is so successful a strategy not only because it manages to turn the oppressed against oppression, but indeed because it does so by rendering oppression itself embarrassing and sometimes even downright intolerable in the policing eyes of the oppressor. Put differently, by frivolously posing in front of the fun house mirror, the oppressed performs an excessive spectacle of oppression (in the form of a parody, a pastiche or an exaggeration) that makes it agonising for the oppressor to suffer and endure the effects of oppression himself. Besides, seeing that camp is not so much a gay sensibility as an invasion of other sensibilities, this performance is not to be brought to a halt here, for camp, it follows, is not the sensibility that tells gay people how to invade normative debates on homosexuality, but the sensibility that tells gay people (and other queer subjects) how to invade, well, all sorts of public debates. Camp urges us to ask the

question: what is being invaded here? And, nine times out of ten, the answer concerns the workings of a normative regime of power. This mode of camp, the subversive one, despises, derides and disrespects the things it mocks. It generates subversion through inauthenticity, telling society that it is not authentic; subversion through insubordination, telling society that it is subordinate, and, to paraphrase Philip Core, subversion through a lie, telling society the truth (cf. Core 7). *In short, this mode of camp is a pertinent and subtle sensibility that does not refuse to be impertinent and unsubtle.*

In terms of restoration, Dollimore, if parenthetically, comes to acknowledge some of the allegedly apolitical aspects of camp that have been so significant for its aesthetic perception. Seeking to resolve conflicting conceptions of the phenomenon, he makes room for both the camp desire for identification, as promoted and advanced by Sontag's "Notes on Camp," and the camp desire for subversion, as promoted and advanced by his own analyses. Hence Dollimore concludes that

"[t]he cultural dynamics of transgressive reinscription suggest how both positions are correct: identification with, and desire *for*, may coexist with parodic subversion *of*, since culture is not reducible to the specific desires of individuals comprising it – desires which anyway differ considerably – and even less to the 'truth' of desire itself." (Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* 321)

Initiating a reconciliation between the political and aesthetic agendas of camp, Dollimore claims their coexistence. And this claim, facilitating both social change and personal healing, is more than salutary, especially in times of AIDS when a mere political deployment of camp, despite its indisputable necessity, turns out to be basically insufficient, since it tends to exhaust itself in paranoid anticipations, since it promotes social change yet ignores personal healing; and in the end, since, according to Ian Lucas, "it disavows a whole range of campery where the object is not to reveal or conceal but simply to *be*" (Lucas 118).

Unifying politics and aesthetics, Eve Sedgwick finally develops an analysis of camp that does justice to both its subversive and its restorative resources in a chapter called "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," taken from her book *Touching Feeling*, first published in 2003. Contrasting two dissimilar modes of reading, Sedgwick calls

vehemently for a paradigm shift that sketches both the advantages of a frequently underrated reparative reading practice and the disadvantages of a frequently overrated paranoid reading practice. The latter, she says, marks the mode that informs the contemporary academic preoccupation with projects such as denaturalisation, demystification and exposure. As such, paranoid reading practices are indeed indispensable; and nevertheless, their subversive projects, all-pervading and all-corrosive, only ever stimulate negative affects, thus sacrificing relief, consolation and healing for fear, anticipation and exhaustion. Concerning camp, Sedgwick has us consider that

“[t]he queer-identified practice of camp [...] may be seriously misrecognized when it is viewed, as [Judith] Butler and others view it, through paranoid lenses. As we’ve seen, camp is most often understood as uniquely appropriate to the projects of parody, denaturalization, demystification, and mocking exposure of the elements and assumptions of a dominant culture. And the degree to which camping is motivated by love seems often to be understood mainly as the degree of its self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo. By this account, the x-ray gaze of the paranoid impulse in camp sees through to an un-fleshed skeleton of culture; the paranoid aesthetic on view here is one of minimalist elegance and conceptual economy.” (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 149)

Sedgwick, it follows, puts the paranoid reading practice into perspective, essentially doubting that its subversive achievements are of any use without their restorative equivalents. What is the use of exposing what we already know, or only realistically suspect? What is the use of permanently engaging in anticipations of the worst if there is no way of preventing the things we anticipate from happening? What is the use of a mental early-warning system, if it does not offer any means of protection or refuge? According to Sedgwick, there is no use. Paranoia unleashes the most negative affects so that its long-term psychological consequences frequently inflict damage on the paranoid that is no less substantial or severe than that which an acute external threat could bring about.

Counteracting the shortcomings of a paranoid deployment of camp, Sedgwick seeks to reinvest in its reparative resources, whose “glue of surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment, unexplained up-wellings of threat, contempt, and longing cements together and ani-

mates the amalgam of powerful part-objects” (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 150). Not unlike Sontag, she calls for a loving and appreciative identification with beauty and style; and nevertheless, unlike Sontag, Sedgwick does so without the need for cynicism. For Sedgwick, camp, the tender feeling and vulnerable longing, does not fear social disregard as much as personal disenchantment. She explains that

“[t]he desire of a reparative impulse [...] is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self. To view camp as, among other things, the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to do better justice to many of the classic camp performances [...]” (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 149-50)

The accumulation, cultivation and unreserved spending of reparative resources in abundance, this is the principal priority of camp. In other words, camp teaches us to take life lightly again, to see it through the comic rather than the tragic lens, to generously invest in self-preservation in good times so as to be consoled in bad times when a smile merely reveals that the cost of crying may be too high to pay.

Accordingly, Sedgwick argues in favour of a balance between paranoid and reparative reading practices, thus recovering the latter, the reparative reading practice, which, in her eyes, has for a long time been fiercely neglected or even ridiculed, on the grounds that it is too naive, too sentimental, or simply self-deceptive. Her additive line of reasoning, however, shows that

“[n]o less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of culture – even from a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.” (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 150-1)

Camp can therefore be deployed to support paranoid as well as reparative reading practices. The former aims at familiar objectives like de-

naturalisation, demystification and exposure. The latter, by contrast, aims at equally significant objectives like relief, consolation and healing. What this quote also shows is that both practices, however far apart in terms of strategy, often converge not only within one and the same community, i.e. on a formative social level, but also within one and the same individual self, i.e. on a formative personal level. Hence each and everyone may benefit from the utilisation of paranoid *and* reparative camp practices, so that “it is not people but mutual positions – or, I would want to say, practices – that can be divided between the paranoid and the reparative; it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices” (Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” 150). In a strategic move that goes even further than Dollimore’s, Sedgwick eventually arrives at a cultivation of camp that makes this extravagant phenomenon viable for both projects – social change and personal healing – and moreover, it does so at a time when AIDS and its effects have unmistakably revealed that camp needs to make allowances for both paranoia and reparation, especially with regard to the issues raised in this study.

Camp Care

Sounding out the forces that inform not so much caring as the attitude that underlies caring, the forces, to be precise, that lie, or maybe lurk, behind the motivation to take care of others, Lytton Strachey sets out to paint the full-size picture of a true legend of nursing and caring, Florence Nightingale. Sketching her portrait with all its otherwise obscured blemishes, Strachey, the camp biographer, courageously defies the passing of time in order to prevent the ‘real’ Florence Nightingale from sinking into oblivion and, moreover, to prevent the legend from turning into a saint:

“Every one knows the popular conception of Florence Nightingale. The saintly, self-sacrificing woman, the delicate maiden of high degree who threw aside the pleasures of a life of ease to succour the afflicted Lady of the Lamb, gliding through the horrors of the hospital at Scutari, and consecrating with the radiance of her goodness the dying soldier’s couch – the vision is familiar to all. But the truth was different. The Miss Nightingale of fact was not as facile fancy painted her. She worked in another fashion, and towards other ends; she

moved under the stress of an impetus which finds no place in the popular imagination. A Demon possessed her. Now demons, whatever else they may be, are full of interest. And so it happens that in the real Miss Nightingale there was more that was interesting than in the legendary one; there was also less that was agreeable.” (*Eminent Victorians* 97)

Strachey’s picture of Nightingale, part of his famous collection of witty biographical sketches *Eminent Victorians*, starts out with a pointed interrogation of this Victorian epitome of caring, an interrogation that suggests that caring, more often than not, is itself an effect of tyranny, maybe even ideology, rather than an upshot of altruistic philanthropy. According to Strachey, “it was not by gentle sweetness and womanly self-abnegation that she had brought order out of chaos in the Scutari hospitals [...]; it was by strict method, by stern discipline, by rigid attention to detail, by ceaseless labour, by the fixed determination of an indomitable will” (*Eminent Victorians* 111). And moreover, even though “she passed through the wards in her plain dress, so quiet, so unassuming [...] the keener eye perceived something more than that – [...] something peevish, something mocking, and yet something precise” (*ibid.*). What the keen eye could in fact perceive was “the serenity of high deliberation in the scope of the capacious brow, the sign of power in the dominating curve of the thin nose, and the traces of a harsh and dangerous temper” (*ibid.*). And thus it is hardly surprising to learn that Miss Nightingale was reputed never to have raised her voice in ways that betrayed a loss of countenance – “[o]nly, when she had spoken, it seemed as if nothing could follow but obedience” (*ibid.*).

Strachey’s irreverent sketch of this epitome of caring makes one thing perfectly clear: just because you think yourself in good hands, it does not mean that you are *not* in the hands of discipline, power and authority. Once you submit to the care of professional caregivers, you submit to the hierarchies that organise the relationship imbalance between patients and doctors, or indeed between patients and the drug industry. More often than not this submission demands subjection on the side of the patients, whose compliance not only forces them to abide by the constraining standards of healthy living, but indeed to do so *for their own good*.⁹ For, to use Strachey’s words, the healthcare

9 In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault prominently sketches the mechanisms of modern policing, arguing that they rely on “a whole set of in-

system works towards other ends. To play by its rules is simultaneously to surrender to its demand for discipline, its power and its authority, especially when these properties operate on the edge of credibility, especially, that is to say, when medicine itself is visibly helpless in the face of a virus for which, thus far, there is no cure. From the viewpoint of the medical profession and the drug industry, what is at issue here, and there can be no doubt about it, is the survival of the patient. And yet this issue is compromised in that it serves the healthcare system to uphold people's blind faith in orthodox medicine and its assumed authority in matters of health. Health, however, is not equivalent to survival at all costs. And the healthcare system, even though it may well look after the patient's body, can hardly be trusted to look after their spirit as well, let alone, their personal wellbeing, their mental stability or their sanity. In other words, to submit to the healthcare system is also to submit to a regime of discipline, power and authority that does all that can be done to conceal its own subjection to AIDS.

Given the limits of public healthcare, the care for the sick must therefore rely on queer ministrations to provide for more than just the bare necessities of medical treatment. As Crimp points out:

“Apart from the deaths, we contend with the gruesome illness itself, acting as caretakers, often for very extended periods, making innumerable hospital visits, providing emotional support, negotiating our wholly inadequate and inhuman health care and social welfare systems, keeping abreast of experimental treatment therapies. Some of us have learned as much or more than most doctors about the complex medicine of AIDS.” (Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy” 145-6)

In the first part of the subsequent analysis, then, attention will be drawn to the ways in which camp helps AIDS patients cope with their calamitous condition. As a lived practice that offers both paranoid and

struments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 215). Elaborating on Foucault's analysis, D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* exposes that “[d]isciplinary power constitutively mobilizes a tactic of tact: it is the policing power that never passes for such, but is either invisible or visible only under cover of other, nobler or simply blander intentionalities (to educate, to cure, to produce, to defend)” (Miller, *The Novel and the Police* 17).

reparative resources, camp, on the one hand, frequently serves to anticipate the ambivalent moves of what Crimp calls the “wholly inadequate and inhuman health care and social welfare systems,” thus weighing up the thin line between the interests of the patient and those of the system itself (*ibid.*). On the other hand, it emerges as a source of emotional support whose insight and understanding provides a different kind of healing.

In the short story collection *Monopolies of Loss*, Adam Mars-Jones presents two stories, “Slim” and “Remission,” that describe and depict life through the eyes of an AIDS patient. Both stories come to dissect a public healthcare system whose ambivalent interests testify to an ideology of caring that, by feigning philanthropy, paradoxically promises self-preservation at the expense of self-abandonment. Via a camp imagination, however, both narrators are able to expose the underpinnings of this ideology of caring whose real-life manifestations – ranging from members of the medical profession to the drug industry, from charity to hypocritical and in fact helpless appeals to positive thinking – more often than not seek to subject the sick in order to conceal their own subjection to the virus. In addition to this paranoid gaze, however, camp grants a reparative relief that takes pleasure in its smart and witty observations and that, in addition, allows the two narrators to explore new ways of healing and to experience a form of interpersonal care that is neither ambivalent, nor compromised: the sense of belonging and togetherness that makes a queer family.

Turning to Rafael Campo, this study reveals a highly sensitive attitude towards caring, put forward by someone who is himself a member of the medical profession. Rafael Campo, a doctor and a poet, longs to initiate healing with both medication and poetry. In his poems, he reveals an omnipresent condition of paranoia among the members of so-called risk groups, mainly gays and Latinos, whom he encounters on his daily routines as a physician. This condition, he unmistakably suggests, results from the panic that has for a long time informed the public discourse on HIV and AIDS, a discourse that, in the media and elsewhere, tends to represent the disease as an inescapable prophecy. Regarding his patients, Campo comes to examine and to value the reparative forces of drag as a means designed to reinvent and reassemble the self through a number of camp gender performances. In his volume of poetry *What the Body Told*, he illustrates how, at their best, some of these performances bring about a self-fashioning that confers hope, re-

lief and strength on the patients who perform them and how, when being nurtured, cultivated, and met with empathy, these performances allow even the medical doctor to see that sometimes it is better to die in dignity than to live in pain.

Camp Elegies

One might as well begin by debunking a popular misconception: nine times out of ten, when you dream of surrounding yourself with grazing sheep, this dream should be considered a warning sign designed to tell you that you will end up in the middle of nowhere rather than in a pastoral sanctuary, both geographically and psychologically. It takes more to be consoled than a pasture and a flock. That is not to say that pastoral conventions do not frequently stimulate a reparative imagination; however, it does indicate that loss is not as easy to cope with as conventional psychoanalytical readings of the literature of grief, the pastoral elegy, insistently suggest. Nevertheless, responses to loss, especially gay loss, are urgently needed.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler laments the downright inability of heteronormative society to perceive homosexual loss, let alone acknowledge the breaking of a homosexual attachment as loss. Moreover, the undesirability of homosexual attachments in such a society basically entails its reluctance to even identify (rather than simply foreclose) the possibility of homosexual love or grief, so that the heteronormative inability to admit to any gay-related emotional needs at all, no matter whether they concern an attachment or a loss, is certainly “made all the more acute [at a time] when we consider the ravages of AIDS, and the task of finding a public occasion and language in which to grieve this seemingly endless number of deaths” (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 138). Stressing the urgency of this matter, Butler rightfully asserts that “where there is no public recognition or discourse through which such a loss might be named and mourned, [...] melancholia takes on cultural dimensions of contemporary consequence” (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 139). Becoming more and more paranoid, she goes on to investigate and dissect the pre-emptive inarticulacy at the core of melancholia, thereby arriving at a line of reasoning that views melancholia as an operation of regulatory power designed to stabilise existing gender norms. In this scenario, melancholia, the condition of grief that cannot name its loss, results in a

melancholic incorporation of the unnamed loss, a melancholic incorporation that, according to both Freud and Butler, has a formative effect on the ego. In short, Butler posits that “heterosexualized genders form themselves through renouncing the *possibility* of homosexuality,” so that traditional gender taxonomies in effect come to reproduce themselves as an effect of “the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love” (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 146). Put differently, we incorporate and finally become what we must neither love, nor mourn. For Butler, it follows that the heteronormative regime has a strong interest in upholding “the absence of cultural conventions for allowing the loss of homosexual love,” precisely because “this absence produces a culture of heterosexual melancholy, one which can be read in the hyperbolic identifications by which mundane heterosexual masculinity and femininity confirm themselves” (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 147). In her opinion, the forces of social regulation which find their expression in the pre-emptive inarticulacy of melancholia are all but inescapable. Melancholia turns into a mechanism that “initiates a variable boundary [...] that distributes and regulates the psychic sphere in relation to prevailing norms of social regulation” (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 171). Predictably, Butler’s interest in melancholia tends to focus on its effects on the social and cultural reproduction of traditional gender roles. Far worse, however, are its effects on the individual, seeing that “a loss in the world that cannot be declared enrages, generates ambivalence, and becomes the loss ‘in’ the ego that is nameless, diffuse and that prompts public rituals of self-beratement,” so that this condition is what principally needs to be prevented when Butler comes to address an obvious fact, namely that “the emergence of collective institutions for grieving are [...] crucial to survival, to reassembling community, to rearticulating kinship, to reweaving sustaining relations” (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 185 and 148).

Butler thus reclaims the need to articulate gay grief. To find a language, or a discourse, that allows for the mourning of homosexual loss, however, is not a simple matter. On the one hand, this discourse needs to follow a universalising strategy so as to be publicly identified and recognised as a discourse of mourning. On the other hand, it needs to pursue a particularising strategy so as to prevent the pre-emptive inarticulacy of melancholia from foreclosing that the loss that is being mourned is in fact a homosexual loss and, in turn, so as to prevent this

homosexual loss from being rendered invisible through time-honoured elegiac conventions that disown its homosexual specificity. In other words, gay grief has to make perfectly clear that it is both grief and gay. These troubles, however, must not blind us to the fact that recent literary representations of gay loss and mourning do adopt a language, and even a literary discourse, that serves to articulate a different response – or, more explicitly, that serves to fully realise the camp potential of a familiar response. Their response to gay grief is a tragicomic invasion of the pastoral elegy: the camp pastoral elegy.

In *The Folding Star*, Alan Hollinghurst campily dismantles the life of thirty something Edward Manners as he meticulously passes through the literary stages of the pastoral elegy on the look-out for comfort in life. Holding on to his ridiculous and at times even downright pathetic pastoral fantasies, Manners eventually finds himself descending into the depth of depression. In a tragicomic way that depicts the *tour-de-force* of his protagonist with amused detachment, Hollinghurst thus effectively undercuts traditional evocations of pastoral-elegiac conventions, which repeatedly surface in Manners' erudite and nonetheless markedly naive imagination. Moreover, Hollinghurst comes to mock not only the literary conventions of the elegiac genre, but also its simplistic psychoanalytical interpretations and its melancholic artistic variations, seeing that, on the one hand, Manners is revealed to translate the Freudian mourning process into the traditions of the pastoral elegy, thus hubristically equating the psychoanalytical with the literary work of mourning, while, on the other hand, his melancholy leanings lead him to narcissistically identify with the reclusive lives and the sinister works of Symbolist artists. Involuntarily camp, then, Manners time and again mistakes artifice for authenticity, or indeed the literary for the literal, forever unable to see his weak spot: myopia. Myopia signifies both a tragic flaw for the protagonist and a source of comic relief for the reader so that Manners' unintentionally camp misrecognitions at length provide the reparative resources that allow Hollinghurst to illustrate the utter hopelessness of time-honoured elegiac conventions when it comes to facing the traumatic experience of loss.

Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" is the only text in the entire study that does not reference AIDS directly. Nevertheless, its dynamics of love and loss are no less virulent and no less tied in with the experience of gay grief than any of the other literary sources.

In fact, at a time when Suzanne Poirier radically asserts that “all writing today is AIDS writing in that it must consciously choose how to respond to the epidemic, whether by direct involvement or evasion,” this pastoral-elegiac reprise provides a salient example of the preemptive inarticulacy at the core of melancholia that results from the socio-cultural prohibition to love and mourn anything but heteronormative attachments (Poirier 7). In “Brokeback Mountain,” the issue of gay grief is deeply intertwined with gender melancholia. By juxtaposing two stereotypes of masculinity, the pastoral shepherd and the American Western cowboy, the short story uses genre camp in order to accomplish an invasion of the heteronormative American Western genre through the homoerotic implications of the pastoral elegy, thus identifying and assigning a no less homoerotic innuendo to the melancholy taciturnity, i.e. to the marked inarticulacy, that characterises the model masculinity of the cowboy. Genre camp, however, grows darker in “Brokeback Mountain,” once the reparative stimulus of pastoral sentimentality has to give way to the distinctly more paranoid (though no less sentimental) displays of an American Western anti-sentimentality. As a result, Annie Proulx eventually reintroduces the pastoral elegy as a genre whose conventions, in Western culture, testify to spectacles of both homoeroticism and gay moribundity.

Camp Meta-Fictions

Stuart Hall has expressed his residual troubles with both theories and ‘grand narratives,’ suggesting that we need “a different metaphor for theoretical work: the metaphor of struggle, of wrestling with angels. The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency.” (Hall 265-6) This metaphor – wrestling with angels – appeals to be particularly apt for an analysis of the classic narratives of camp, not least because one of the most prominent and insightful literary confrontations of AIDS, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, offers a very literal (and camp) staging of this metaphor.¹⁰ *Angels in America*, of course, angrily takes on all

10 In the scene in question, the AIDS victim and designated ‘prophet’ Prior wants to reject the prophecy he is supposed to spread because he disagrees with the reactionary policies of heaven. Not knowing how to refuse the sheer force of the Angel of America, he seeks help from his friend, his ex-

the ‘grand narrative’ of dominant history, embedding its plotline in debates about religion, politics and ideology to paint a larger picture of the late 80s and the early 90s. In contrast, the study here examines the classic narratives of camp itself, much in the sense of Stuart Hall, whose words imply that we should first probe those theories and ‘grand narratives’ we treasure most. Revisiting the canon of camp classics, we thus need to wrestle with the products of camp culture in order to examine their responses – paranoid or reparative, subversive or restorative – to the questions and problems they raise and to reassess what is worth being maintained and what is actually to be fought off. Therefore, the last part of this analysis aims to probe a classic site of camp culture, the musical comedy, whose visions of nostalgic sanctuaries frequently strive to offer the comforts of a better world of make-believe. As Gittings asserts, it is

“[b]ecause of its exclusionary nature but also because of the pronounced and self-reflexive theatricality of the genre, [that] the Hollywood musical has long been subject to transgressive, queer readings (think of the resonance of *The Wizard of Oz* [Victor Fleming, 1939] and of iconic figures like Judy Garland and Carmen Miranda in gay cultures).” (Gittings 30)

Gittings’ assertion, then, already hints at an MGM musical that is notorious for its campiness, even as its unmistakably normative affirmation of hetero-nuclear family structures in the end conveys a message that is everything but campy: *The Wizard of Oz*.

Canadian author Geoff Ryman provides a meta-fictional reflection on *The Wizard of Oz* in his third novel, called *Was*. Ryman sets out to rewrite both L. Frank Baum’s novels and Victor Fleming’s musical adaptation, thereby narrating the story of three children who struggle to come to terms with a normative environment that tries to deprive

lover’s future Mormon mother-in-law Hannah, who advises him to “wrestle her. [...] It’s an angel, you ... just ... grab hold and say ... oh what was it, wait, wait umm ... OH! Grab her, say ‘I will not let thee go except thou bless me!’ Then wrestle with her till she gives in” – and indeed, Prior wrestles successfully, since the somewhat conceited and after all very mundane Angel tears a muscle in her thigh and, thus, leaves Prior to return his prophecy to heaven, if grudgingly and under protest (*Angels in America* 250).

them of their queerness. They are: Dorothy Gael, the ‘real’ Dorothy, who moves to Kansas to live with her relatives Aunty Em and Uncle Henry and whose traumatic experiences challenge the progress narrative of the pioneering days; Frances Gumm, alias Judy Garland, who acts the part of Dorothy Gale in the movie and whose miserable fate reveals the down side of Hollywood’s film industry; and Jonathan, a proto-gay boy from a Canadian satellite town called Corndale, who grows up to become a horror-movie actor whose rapidly deteriorating medical condition, due to AIDS, leads him to look for consolation and to rediscover a second childhood in the land of Oz which has stirred his reparative fantasies ever since he was a child. Permanently juxtaposing history and fantasy, *Was* challenges some of the most treasured American myths, i.e. the pioneering days and the dream factory. Above and beyond, however, the novel examines the theories we, the queer scholars, use to advance projects of demystification, denaturalisation and exposure. Acknowledging the importance of such theories, *Was* nevertheless reminds us that reparation will only ever come about if it is viewed as a lived practice rather than a mere academic catchword.

Plunging In

Closing this introduction, it seems useful to once again stress the need for reparation in times of AIDS as well as the enduring tension between the powerlessness and the indispensability of academic enquiries when it comes to alleviating the effects of the disease. As Stuart Hall points out, AIDS “urgently brings before us our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world” (Hall 272). Nevertheless, “[u]nless we operate in this tension, we don’t know what cultural studies can do, can’t, can never do; but also, what it has to do, what it alone has a privileged capacity to do” (Hall 272-3). To make this tension a productive one, the following discussion focuses on representations of AIDS whose camp impact is supposed to close the gap between reparation as a reading practice and reparation as a lived practice. These representations, as David Román conclusively points out, serve to make us aware that

“we too are involved in the production and distribution of the discourses that constitute the social phenomenon we call AIDS. [...] Our engagement involves

a certain complicity that we must either entertain or resist. Our task is to locate our participation so that we can question it, and then formulate, in our own voices, the available avenues of opposition to the positions we eschew or the available courses of support for those we embrace. Camp, as one alternative, already points to the complexity of the situation of constructing selves, as well as to some of the possible pleasures. Such a project – to intervene in the dominant representations governing AIDS – must involve a serious interrogation of the discourses, imagined or available, by which we fashion our identities to counter AIDS. The goal to fight back and stop AIDS is, moreover, securable to all of us who participate in the collective and localized enterprise we call theater. No doubt, for many of us, it's the role of a lifetime.” (Román 230)

Román closes with a metaphorical insight here: the fight against AIDS (and for reparation) is, for many of us, the role of a lifetime. Camp brings this theatrical metaphor back to life, forever intertwining the literary and the literal. Therefore it is through camp that the gap between reparation as a reading practice and reparation as a lived practice begins to close, for camp itself eventually emerges as strategy for both representation and survival.