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## Mass Camp and the Old Hollywood Melodrama Today

Camp is a form of historicism viewed histrionically.

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CAMP, THE LAST province of meaning I discuss, departs from the topics of prior chapters insofar as it is not as completely affiliated with institutional practices as academic essays, studio advertising, reviews, or star discourse. Indeed, camp appropriations of films seem much more a product of individual or sub-cultural investments that lie outside mainstream supervision. The best way of studying camp, then, would seem to be through empirical, ethnographic methods aimed at the person, rather than through historiographical methods focused on large social networks.

I include a discussion of camp here for two reasons. First, camp appears to have a staunch place in the reception of Sirk's melodramas. We can detect its existence, on the one hand, in the critical disavowals that attempted to expunge it from consideration. In the 1970s, Paul Willemen treated camp as a "willful misreading . . . of Sirk's films by . . . nostalgia freaks," while Andrew Sarris and James Harvey defended the artificial *mise-en-scène* in *Imitation of Life* against possible camp appropriation. The film, Sarris claimed, was "too relentlessly reflective," to warrant such responses; Harvey simply cautioned that Sirk must be taken "seriously and *not* campily."<sup>2</sup> In each case, critics were well aware that Sirk's films attracted a humorous popular reception. However, in order to establish Sirk as a serious, self-reflexive, Brechtian filmmaker, they had to discredit such apparently frivolous reactions. But even as critics attempted to dismiss camp, their denials registered its nagging presence.

On the other hand, beyond its absent presence in Sirk criticism, camp has been more positively addressed as a bona fide reaction to his melodramas. In chapter 3 we saw how Jonathan Rosenbaum, a reviewer for the *Soho Weekly News*, questioned the unresolved "split" he had observed between left-wing and

camp readings of Sirk films, implying that academics should come to terms with Sirk's characteristic camp reception. J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice* took the legitimacy of camp one step further by analyzing *Written on the Wind* through an aesthetic trained on its absurd plot twists and hyperbolic Technicolor style.<sup>3</sup>

The point is that whether denying or affirming camp, critics and reviewers have recorded it as a significant popular response to Sirk's melodramas. In this sense, the affiliation between camp and Sirk seems an issue too important to ignore in a study focused on the vicissitudes of meaning that have defined his films historically. The fact that this affiliation remains enigmatic—observed, but so little analyzed, even within recent work that has confirmed the strong relationship between melodrama and camp—makes it an additionally intriguing area of inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

My second reason for treating camp is that the phenomenon may not be as divorced from institutional influences as it might initially seem. There are varieties of camp response that are distinctly gay or otherwise subcultural. But there are also forms of camp born from mainstream mass cultural conditions affecting the general population. Since the 1960s, a combination of social and media developments have caused an efflorescence of camp in the culture at large, making it a sensibility available to many. This more institutionalized form of camp or mass camp has produced a major set of dynamics influencing how classic Hollywood films, including melodramas, appear within a contemporary setting.

The connection between the mass media and camp attitudes toward the cinema is visible at the very least in the number of forums that have customarily spoofed films and their stars. Such forums include "The Tonight Show" (1962–), "The Carol Burnett Show" (1967–1979), "Saturday Night Live" (1975–), "Second City TV" (1977–1981), and, more recently, the Nickelodeon channel and the Comedy Channel's "Mystery Science Theater 3000." These and other popular manifestations of camp attitudes have led to a greater awareness of prior conventions through parody, creating an intricate relation between convention and parody that affects the manner in which audiences presently view films from the past. Mass camp, that is, has encouraged a sensibility that views past Hollywood films as inadvertent campy send-ups. This sensibility is probably part of the reason why students laugh during classroom screenings of classic Hollywood films, and why professors have to work so hard to redirect student responses through theoretical, critical, or historical argument.

By concentrating on mass camp in this chapter, I do not mean to somehow displace subcultural or gay camp from importance. It is simply that the mass variation of camp is most suitable for the present study's focus on institutional modes of meaning production. In addition, by recognizing camp's pervasiveness

in culture beyond its subcultural association, I hope to speculate usefully on how its broad presence affects the routine appropriation of Hollywood melodramas by mass audiences today.

I will begin by briefly surveying how theorists have defined camp. This will help clarify the phenomenon itself, particularly its traditional relationship with subcultures, thereby providing some necessary context for recharacterizing camp as a mass practice. Next, I will discuss the developments that led to a more widespread camp response, examining how these developments generally affected the perception of studio era Hollywood films. Finally, I will suggest why film melodramas are particularly susceptible to mass camp appropriation, offering some tentative hypotheses or "notes" on the complicated issue of how Sirk's films mean in a contemporary, popular cultural context.

### Defining Camp

Cultural critics tend to define camp by discussing three of its aspects: camp taste, camp practitioners, and camp politics. From one of its major origins in the cult of the dandy in nineteenth-century England through Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades in the 1920s to the rise of pop culture in the 1960s, the camp sensibility has mocked and opposed high culture aesthetics. Critics have consistently described camp as a kind of "counter-taste" that vies brashly with truisms about good taste to establish the validity and special worth of that which appears to be vulgar. As Susan Sontag wrote in 1966, camp is based on "the great discovery that the sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement . . . that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste. . . . The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating. . . . Here camp taste supervenes upon good taste as a daring and witty hedonism.<sup>5</sup> Camp represents a gleeful alternative to repressive cultural canons circumscribed by respectability, a way in which certain individuals can "drop out" of society and flex their aesthetic muscles in unconventional ways.

As an exercise of countertaste, camp can appear in the form of self-presentation (such as the dandy, cross-dressing) or as a vision projected by an artist on his or her artwork (such as ready-mades, pop art). It can also occur through the viewer's conversion of diverse objects into camp (such as Tiffany lamps, Godzilla movies, Victor Mature). The camp viewer gravitates toward images that self-consciously demonstrate exaggeration, stylization, and tackiness, such as pop art or a John Waters film, as well as those more "naive" images that unintentionally represent excess and bad taste, such as Victor Mature's hypermasculinity or the phony special effects of a Japanese horror movie. In this vein, Michael

Bronski writes that camp is a particular "reimagining of the material world . . . which transforms and comments upon the original. It changes the 'natural' and 'normal' into style and artifice."<sup>6</sup> Whatever its specific manifestations, camp operates as an aggressive metamorphosing operation, attacking norms of behavior, appearance, and art to revel in their inherent artifice. Camp taste is thus distinctly antinatural, eschewing beauty and realism in favor of the patently gilded.

While critics agree on the relation of camp taste and artifice, consensus fails on the issue of who practices camp. Some identify camp as primarily a gay phenomenon. In *Gays and Film* Jack Babuscio argues that "camp describes those elements in a person, situation or activity which express or are created by a gay sensibility." For Babuscio "any appreciation of camp expresses an empathy with typical gay experience."<sup>7</sup> For many in this community, camp emerges as a means of celebrating group solidarity through the exercise of shared aesthetic codes, whether in the form of Judy Garland adoration or enthusiasm about "Dynasty." It also offers the potential to materialize an alternative voice through the willful conversion of mainstream standards and ideals.

Camp has proven to be a particularly effective aesthetic for gays, because its desire to probe mainstream cultural assumptions has included substantial attention to gender. Gays have often used the disaffected qualities of camp to provoke reconsideration of the social distinctions between masculine and feminine. From transvestism to stars who parody or defy normative definitions of gender, including Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Victor Mature, and Johnny Weismuller, gay camp has been attracted to styles and objects that could illuminate the inherent constructedness of presumed natural categories of gender. Mae West's exaggerated femininity and Marlene Dietrich's androgyny confirmed, respectively, the contrived character of sexual identity and the innate bisexuality of individuals. When focused on gender, camp's proclivity toward excess and artifice could produce a host of iconoclastic sexual spectacles for enjoyment by a community whose own sexual identities lie outside social convention.

Other critics such as Susan Sontag and Andrew Ross address the links between camp and intellectuals. The requisite components of camp are still in force—a penchant for lowbrow tackiness, hyperbole, and artifice over nature—but it appears as a specialized mode of interpretation available primarily to those schooled in culture. That is, only those who are familiar with a broad range of aesthetic offerings, who understand the conventions of good taste well enough to enjoy deposing them, and who have the time to reconstitute themselves and/or objects in extravagant new ways, are liable to pursue the highly self-conscious and omnivorous art of camp. More significantly, however, camp

became a vehicle by which some intellectuals could grant themselves cultural power.

Both Sontag and Ross agree that, with the fading of the official aristocracy and rise of a democratizing mass culture in the twentieth century, camp emerged for certain groups as a means of salvaging an aristocratic posture through the exercise of taste. Camp, on the one hand, "offered a negotiated way by which this most democratic of cultures could be partially 'recognized' by intellectuals."<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it enabled intellectuals to create for themselves an aristocratic identity based on a privileged style of taste not shared by cultural members at large. By canonizing Zsa Zsa Gabor's *Queen of Outer Space* (1958), Flash Gordon comics, and *National Enquirer* headlines, intellectual groups situated themselves between the masses, who allegedly took their mass culture straight, and high culture intellectuals, who reviled such products. As camp proponents often reclaimed objects from the dung heap of mass culture, they created an odd connoisseurship that signified their superior, culturally privy, hip status. By creating a dissident set of aesthetics, camp practitioners assumed a self-proclaimed stance within culture as a minority elite.

Still other writers tend to avoid an exclusive equation between gays, intellectuals, and camp. For example, Philip Core describes how the camp personality cuts across sexual choice, being defined instead by a kind of spiritual isolation induced by an offbeat or eccentric lifestyle, appearance, or artistic practice. In the camp person, this sense of isolation is accompanied by a desire to display his or her affectations, à la Mick Jagger, Andy Warhol, or Grace Jones, to make a mark on culture, as well as to create a small world permeated with his or her own character.<sup>9</sup> In this case, camp defines those who assert their marginality and difference through theatrical style.

But whether elaborating the gay or intellectual or spiritually isolated identities of the camp aesthete, theorists underscore the definitive relation between social marginality and camp. Camp acts as a form of expressive rebuttal to the values of dominant culture for those on the margins. This alternative position raises the issue of camp politics.

For Babuscio and Bronski, camp is eminently political, a means to personal liberation and empowerment because it enables gay men a voice in an adversarial culture. This voice both creates the conditions for group solidarity as gays share common aesthetic codes, and provides a valuable means of subverting mainstream culture.<sup>10</sup> On the opposite end of the spectrum, Sontag assumes that camp is "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" because its obsession with style overrides concern for content (p. 277). Mark Booth develops this line of thought further when he remarks that, based on its strong parodic aspects,

camp "is a self-mocking abdication of any pretensions to power."<sup>11</sup> And Andrew Ross elaborates how the camp intellectual, in contrast to Gramsci's organic intellectual, withdraws from class conflict through an essential nonalliance with any dominant social group (p. 11).

Thus, while Bronski and Babuscio emphasize the potential of camp to act as a kind of epistemological weapon in the battle between subcultures and the world, Sontag, Booth, and Ross doubt its ability to extend beyond a concern with, respectively, style, parody, and marginalized pseudo-aristocratic taste to materialize a substantive cultural critique or motivate change.

Theories of camp, then, once they leave the arena of taste, vary on whom they identify as practitioners and on the political value of the camp enterprise. These definitions are subject to an even greater variation when considering the phenomenon of mass camp, a type of response facilitated by developments in mass culture, and more widely available to the middle class than its more marginalized relatives.

### **Mass Camp**

Due to a diverse assortment of circumstances from the 1950s forward, camp could no longer be considered a solely sectarian practice; it became pervasive. As I mentioned in chapter 3, the 1950s saw a great "democratizing" of culture, wherein the mass production and dissemination of media texts for the public brought a fearful reaction from many intellectuals about the general lowering of cultural standards. This democratizing, which blossomed in subsequent years, led to the audiences' preference for "mediocre" mass media products over the more distinguished offerings of high culture. Because of this shift, which granted television shows, genre films, and paperback novels a certain status, the proclamations of the superiority of low art, which had always defined camp taste for its more marginalized audiences, gradually became part of a mass aesthetic. The expansion of mass culture dramatically aided camp's potential for a crossover into mainstream society.

As observers of contemporary camp have pointed out, camp attitudes and artifacts were increasingly enshrined by the popular media in the 1960s and 1970s. Besides the publication of Sontag's essay on camp in 1966, which helped pioneer the contemporary currency of the term, pop art, rock music, television, and film of this era made camp an intimate and very visible feature of mass culture. The pop revolution celebrated objects of mass culture as a direct attack on high art pretensions. By extracting these objects from their mundane or ritualized settings, à la Andy Warhol's Campbell soup can and Marilyn Monroe or

Roy Lichtenstein's takeoffs on soap operas and comic strips, they attained a fetishistic, surrealistic glow that denatured them in camp fashion. Despite, or perhaps because of, its high culture baiting, pop art was eventually canonized as a form of modernism in art museums and offered to the public as part of our national aesthetic heritage.

Rock music similarly contributed to a growing public awareness and proliferation of a camp aesthetic and sensibility. Camp attitudes and dress began appearing in successful rock music trends. Glam rock and punk found musical stars such as the Kinks, David Bowie, Mick Jagger, and Lou Reed adopting dandyism and cross-dressing for their look. The presence of camp in the pervasively popular forum of rock helped produce a broader-based cultural attraction to and acceptance of the phenomenon. While not without its conservative critics, rock music made one of camp's potentially most volatile issues, transgressive sexual identity, into a public spectacle that sold. As countercultural movements, particularly feminism and gay liberation, created an awareness of gender roles and their adherence to constraining social norms, the expression of feminine and masculine identity in the media began to be brought to the forefront of public discussion.

Television and film greatly enhanced this general expansion of camp. These developments both saturated the viewer with a body of timeworn conventions and instilled a self-conscious, often parodic attitude toward them. As Robert Ray has persuasively argued, the broadcast of "old" movies on television in the 1950s, the mimicry of successful cinematic generic formulae by television genre shows (particularly westerns), and the growth of revival houses during the 1960s helped to familiarize viewers with the narrative and formal lingo of earlier films.<sup>12</sup>

The awareness of conventions on the part of media producers and audiences alike created a climate ripe for a reflective commentary on these conventions. Hence, films of the New American Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) offered their audiences reworked versions of original genres, escalating the violence and self-conscious historical importance of the gang in the gangster film or questioning the myth of the potent, capable hero in the western. Other forms served to overtly parody established formulae. Besides the aforementioned "The Carol Burnett Show" and "Saturday Night Live," television shows such as "Get Smart" (1965–1970) and "Batman" (1966–1968), as well as films such as *Cat Ballou* (1965) and *High Anxiety* (1977), parodied traditional genres (the spy movie, fantasy adventure, western, and Hitchcock thriller, respectively), cashing in on the audiences' conversancy with conventions to create self-reflexive comedies from

dramatic remains. Each form of recycling past artifacts—revivals, generic invention, and parody—helped circulate a vast body of Hollywood formulae. At the same time, the latter two precipitated an awareness of ritualized generic, narrative, and stylistic conventions (down to camera movements and nondiegetic film music in *High Anxiety*), as well as the mythologies they embodied about heroism, gender, and romance.

The postwar explosion in media recycling thus encouraged a campy perspective on classic Hollywood films by creating an audience schooled in convention and primed by parodies to discover the inherent artifice of the more “naive” products of the film industry. Moreover, as the postwar years wore on, the “aristocratic” privileges of a college education and leisure time were extended to middle-class youth as a whole, giving them the background and the opportunity to recognize and relish savvy plays with convention. Within the interplay of media reflection and educated hipness, audiences were encouraged not to take their classic Hollywood films “straight.” Through a modern, reflexive lens, these films could appear rather as unintentionally exaggerated and overconventionalized.

Thus, mass camp emerged from a relationship between social developments and media events. These included a growing egalitarian spirit in mass culture, consciousness-raising about gender and sexuality, more widely available educational and leisure opportunities, pop art’s canonization of mass culture, pop music’s questioning of gender categories, and television and film’s emphasis on reflexivity and parody. Within this demarginalization of camp, mass cultural artifacts found their way into public aesthetics, sexual ambiguity became commercially successful, and audiences became highly aware of the artifice of conventions. Remarking on these changes, Booth found that in the 1980s camp had become fully “democratized,” no longer “the prerogative of an economic elite, but the birthright of all” (*Camp*, p. 175). This democratizing process was enabled not only by camp’s explicit visibility in the media, but by general cultural conditions that helped to demarginalize it. Camp thus exceeded its sectarian origins to become a more commonplace reaction to cultural goods. The mass camp sensibility entered mainstream culture ready to adore the mediocre, laugh at the overconventionalized, and critique archaic sex roles.

In democratized or mass camp, we can perceive continuities with subcultural camp, particularly in the former’s flagrant disregard of traditional aesthetics and heightened consciousness of conventional sex roles. But there are also important differences stemming from mass camp’s availability to more people as an aesthetic choice. If camp in mass culture remains a way of dissenting from staid and repressive social conventions concerning dress, behavior, and art, it has



become an especially popular manner of doing so, from Madonna and her fashion clones to late night television shows spoofing old horror and science fiction films. In addition, whereas the earliest dandies and gay men practiced their camp attitudes and styles at some palpable risk of social censure, mass camp tends to be less directly risky. Mass camp can certainly invoke mainstream protest, as rock styles like punk or heavy metal have demonstrated. But its frequent lack of sexual marginality, as well as its embrace as a trendy style by institutions like the fashion industry, have given it a mainstream chicness that can protect against serious vilification. This contemporary attitude still can be a sign of social hipness and superiority, without the "stigma" of subcultural affiliation.

Mass camp's popularity and general lack of danger is nowhere more apparent than in the exercise of camp taste. Camp taste can continue to confirm an aristocratic posture that eschews the notion of sincere consumption by high culture and cultural Neanderthals alike. But there may be less use of camp as a means of solidifying embattled group identity, as in the case of gays and Sontag's apolitical intelligentsia both, and more of a tendency to embrace what is perceived as mediocrity for a transient, disinterested form of recreation without group affiliation or political bite. Diverse viewers can tune into the Nickelodeon channel's campy rebroadcasts of "The Donna Reed Show" (1958–1966) without regarding their experience as pointedly countercultural, as a form of privy bonding in the face of a hostile society. These spectacles exist, rather, as a routine class of entertainment, fun comedies for the enlightened masses.

While mass camp neutralizes the risk and transforms the sectarian nature of subcultural camp, it wholeheartedly embraces one of its cardinal principles. It is this principle that has perhaps the greatest bearing on understanding the relation between mass camp and Hollywood cinema. The camp sensibility has always gravitated toward objects from the past—the Greta Garbos, *King Kongs*, and *Casablanicas* of the film world, for example. This penchant implicitly relies on the historical otherness of the designated objects, their indelible difference from standards of the present, which makes them completely susceptible to transformation through the camp imagination. Ross clarifies the dynamics behind camp's preference for the past, when he writes that the camp effect "is created not simply by the change in the mode of cultural production . . . but rather when the products (stars . . .) of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to produce and dominate cultural meanings, become available in the present for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste" (p. 5). Sheer historical difference does not produce camp; camp results from an imposition of present standards over past forms, turning them into the outdated.

Mass camp has made this hegemony of the present over the disempowered

past into its most emphatic principle. The special effects in *King Kong* (1933) or the high-pitched melodramatic moments from *Mildred Pierce* (1945) can be so prone to camp response, because they appear "hokey" by contemporary standards. When measured, respectively, against the special effects technology of a *Star Wars* (1977) or the more apparently realistic situations of *Terms of Endearment* (1983), classic horror films and melodramas seem anachronistic. Displacing the fact that such forms had been shaped by their own industrial and social conditions of production, mass camp fixes on their anachronisms as a place to register their quaint overconventionality, their excesses in comparison to present representational systems that appear to have greater verisimilitude.

Given its pervasiveness in culture, mass camp acts as a particularly significant manner of appropriating texts from bygone eras. Responding to a difference between past and present conventions, mass camp renegotiates the meaning of films according to modern standards. In so doing, its impact is at the same time profoundly historical and ahistorical. Camp is historical insofar as it represents a means of both circulating and preserving the past, like the Nickelodeon channel, by soliciting affections for forms that might otherwise appear, given the outdatedness of their conventions, as inaccessible. As I have quoted Philip Core in this chapter's epigraph, "Camp is a form of historicism viewed histrionically." That is, camp resurrects past artifacts, not to reconstruct their original meaning in some archaeological sense, but to thoroughly reconstitute them through a theatrical sensibility that modifies them by focusing on their artifice. ✓

But this process of reconstitution reveals camp's ahistoricism as well. As Lotte Eisner cautioned about a similar tendency of rewriting common to kitsch, such contemporary responses tend to "negate the historical context" in which cultural artifacts once had "non-kitsch" meanings.<sup>13</sup> Camp can recognize certain general historical aspects, such as the claustrophobia of traditional sex roles in the 1950s in "The Donna Reed Show." But even so, the very conditions of camp oblige a certain annulment of a text's historicity, the status it may have had in past modes of production and reception. Camp characteristically operates in opposition to this status, choosing to turn a film or television show into something else far removed from its original design. In the mass camp sensibility, the old media readily become the historical Other because they are so patently out of tune with contemporary social and aesthetic values. So many media products qualify for camp enjoyment because they exhibit the necessary exaggerated exotica in their historical outdatedness in everything from dress, behavior, and dialogue to representations of gender, romance, and marriage.

The more "democratic" form of camp acts, then, as a mode of aesthetic appropriation with historical ramifications: things from the past lose the specifics

of their origins, and appear rather in terms of their incongruous relations to contemporary mores and conventions. In this sense, mass camp is distinct from another prevalent response to old Hollywood films as "classics," which seeks to restore and mythologize the circumstances of their production (a tendency vividly represented by the American Movie Channel).

As we shall see in the case of melodrama, mass camp's process of transformation does not necessarily result in a coherent rereading of a film. Rather, mass camp is a "hit-and-run" sensibility insofar as its collision with a text is dramatic in effect, yet momentary. Mass camp gains its pleasures in a sporadic manner, dipping in and out of the text, selecting those moments for response that seem especially antiquated to the contemporary eye. In what follows, I will begin to explore those generic and filmic categories most likely to set off this reaction in relation to the Sirk melodrama.

### **Mass Camp and Melodrama**

Although perhaps not as frequently as horror and science fiction, melodrama has been the target of reflexive play, especially by television. Two situation comedies, "Soap" (1977–1981) and "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" (1975–1978), were explicit satires of melodramatic situations and conventions, while the prime-time soap "Dynasty" (1981–1989) was so outrageously indulgent in its story lines and style that critics and fans regarded it as a camp extravaganza. Along with a continuous diet of daytime and other nighttime soap series, such forums made melodramatic conceits very much a part of the contemporary viewing experience.

If the mass camp sensibility emerges from a satiety with convention and thrives additionally on outdatedness, genre films provide a site rich in possibilities for its exercise. Recycled classic Hollywood melodramas offer many areas particularly conducive to this kind of response: these include its subject matter, dramatic logic, *mise-en-scène*, music, depiction of romance, and representations of gender.

Generally, film melodrama tends to emphasize the social mores of its time, as well its styles and fashions. Hence, melodramas from the earliest days of cinema through the 1960s are liable to appear as keenly "disempowered" in a contemporary context due to the sheer force of social change. Further, melodrama typically demonstrates an exaggerated dramatic logic and style that, through the passage of a few decades, can appear so in excess of contemporary realist norms that it attracts the camp penchant for the absurdly fantastic. In addition, some of melodrama's most definitive elements—its concentration on romance and male/female roles—are likely to register as camp, due to the effects

of gender consciousness-raising through feminism and gay liberation. Through these kinds of historical incongruities, one decade's affecting emotional and visual experience serves to elicit a later period's parodic reflexes. This is not to say that old melodramas do not ever successfully produce emotional catharsis for their audiences; when they fail in this regard, however, a mass camp sensibility is probably to blame.

On the surface, it would appear that melodramatic subject matter is the generic aspect most likely to wear with time. From the Victorian ethos surrounding an illegitimate birth in D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920) to the anti-marijuana hysterics of *Reefer Madness* (1936) to Dorothy Malone's nymphomania in Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957), what represents one era's supreme scandal can strike a future generation's funny bone. This kind of metamorphosis is partially due to a loss in social urgency through the passage of time and the ascension of different crises (such as the issue of illegitimate birth, now a more or less accepted social standard, which presently pales in comparison to concerns about dysfunctional families and child abuse). Since the crisis-ridden structure of melodrama often gravitates toward flagrant violations of propriety, it follows that the course of social progress would render these violations old-fashioned to those in more "advanced" value systems. But subject matter does not have to be scandalous for this effect to take place. The fervent espousal of an anonymous, selfless kind of charity in *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) or the embrace of Walden life aesthetics in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) can strike the same chord, encouraged particularly by the preachiness with which these philosophies are delivered as platforms.

However, upon closer examination, we would have to concede that melodrama's situations are not totally without contemporary currency. Melodramas still strongly center, for example, on sexual indiscretion and intrigue. Viewers who fail to consume studio era melodramas seriously may be partially motivated by the sheer lack of relevance of the topic at hand. But they are equally affected by the style through which these affairs are delivered. That is, melodrama's situations may age badly due to social progress, but this effect also owes strongly to the genre's employment of certain expressive codes. The campy appreciation of melodrama has, in fact, everything to do with how perceptions of its expressive codes as outdated undermine any purported original credibility the genre may once have had—any, that is, "uncampy" meaning.

In terms of dramatic structure, melodramatic plots are particularly focused on the heights of dramatic conflict and the emotional affect such conflicts can arouse on the part of the spectator. Situations such as the moral plunge of a character through alcohol abuse, the travails of star-crossed lovers, or the destructive impact of infidelity on a family are manipulated to produce intense em-

*All That Heaven Allows* (1955): Walden life aesthetics as outdated subject matter.



Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) discovers Thoreau's *Walden*.



Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) with a recurring symbolic deer.

pathetic emotions in the viewer. However, like the opera, a form prone to camp appreciation, the anguished machinations characteristic of such plots can appear so excessive as to create the kind of clash with plausible dramatic logic enjoyed by the camp practitioner. Melodrama's inherent commitment to extreme emotion, dramatic crescendoes, and irrational twists of fate portrayed through reversals and coincidences yields a sense of exaggeration now that may alter the original desired effect.

Sirk's films epitomize this kind of "crazy" dramatic logic. *Magnificent Obsession*, for example, relies on a series of remarkable coincidences. First, Bob Merrick (Rock Hudson) indirectly causes the death of Helen Phillips's husband, a prominent and respected doctor at a nearby hospital. Merrick, an irresponsible playboy, needs to use Phillips's artificial respirator after a careless boating accident, while the doctor dies from a heart attack for want of the same device. Next, as Merrick surreptitiously leaves the hospital before he is officially released, his weakened condition causes him to tumble down a hill just as Helen Phillips (Jane Wyman) drives by him. This coincidence allows the two protagonists to meet, at the same time as it delivers the irony of Phillips unwittingly helping the man indirectly responsible for her husband's death. Later, Merrick crashes his car into a tree, which just happens to be near the house of Dr. Phillips's spiritual mentor, Mr. Randolph. Upon this fateful meeting, Merrick learns of the secret charitable system the doctor had been using to help people for many years. Merrick initially plans to emulate this system as a means of winning Helen Phillips's favor. At this point, Merrick inadvertently causes her blindness, as his unwanted attentions force her into the street in front of an oncoming car. This series of events acts as a prelude to the rest of the film, which describes the medical training Merrick undertakes so that he can cure Helen, and his romantic pursuit of her under an assumed identity.

Similarly, a reversal occurring in the denouement of *All That Heaven Allows* involves Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) finally deciding to forget about social convention and marry the younger, lower-class gardener Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson). She arrives at his house to deliver the good news, but leaves when she discovers he is not home. Meanwhile, Ron has been on a cliff overlooking his house, gesticulating wildly and unsuccessfully to get her attention. He falls off the cliff and is seriously injured. Unaware, Cary drives on. Thus, there is a vertiginous reversal of fortune when the narrative turns from a long-awaited reunion scene between the film's central couple to a dramatic accident that incapacitates the male lead.

The slew of coincidences in *Magnificent Obsession* and the reversal in *All That Heaven Allows* represent a type of dramatic logic that may have once worked for its audiences, but now appears contrived. These devices seem forced,





The reversal toward the end of *All That Heaven Allows*. At the moment of their potential reunion, Ron falls off a cliff while Cary drives away unaware.



tools of narrative expediency and emotional exploitation, rather than of persuasive verisimilitude. As the stories thus lose purchase on contemporary emotions, they appear to the camp viewer as a series of dramatic manipulations, introducing a reflexive and distancing dimension to the spectator's comprehension of the genre.

Melodrama's visual and aural style supports the contrived appearance of the plot. The genre's *mise-en-scène* has a characteristic flamboyance that has often attracted camp appreciation—as in the case of the highly stylized sets and costumes in *Queen Christina* (1933) or Von Sternberg's expressive lighting of Marlene Dietrich in *Shanghai Express* (1932). With its Technicolor richness, luxurious *mise-en-scène*, and lush symphonic musical scores, the 1950s melodrama similarly provides a spectacle of startling exotica when compared with contemporary modes of production, the more "realistic" color schemes and sets of, say, *Fatal Attraction* (1987) or *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1992). The historical difference in style between then and now, in everything from wardrobe to color process, gives these films a sense of foreignness that the viewer assimilates as camp.

*Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life* (1959) are two of Sirk's most opulent films. As J. Hoberman points out in his review, the former film's brilliant Technicolor surface magnifies the overstated colors which symbolize wealth and sexual malaise (including bright yellow and red sports cars, scarlet phones and flowers, and swirling pink negligees). Visually, the film thus attains a lurid, trashy feel, sending its style and characterizations "over the top." Besides the campy excess found in the general look of Sirk's melodramas, *mise-en-scène* is subject to another historical rewriting. Melodramatic *mise-en-scène* tends to sport the latest fashions or interior decors. Since decor and fashion are intimately connected to the evolution of trends, they are elements of film design highly susceptible to being viewed as anachronistic. Universal originally sold the fashions and accessories in *Imitation of Life* as high fashion in an attempt to attract the consumer impulses of female patrons in an era focused on expanding the domestic market. Over thirty years later, this element of the film no longer has the same purchase on middle-class female desire, which has since moved on to other consumer fantasies. Lora Meredith's (Lana Turner) *nouveau riche* house in the mountains or pink, fur-trimmed, dressing gown and turban or bleached blonde hair thus appear ostentatious, unbelievable, hilarious. In this way, the archaic status of color and aspects of melodramatic *mise-en-scène* render style as recognizable artifice, as something that makes these films bizarrely fantastic.

The effects of film music in soliciting comedic readings of melodrama cannot be overestimated. Critical moments in classic melodramas are usually accom-

panied by dramatic music that is so emphatic that it appears naively exaggerated. Part of the reason the charity theme in *Magnificent Obsession* strikes the camp viewer as so corny, is that its espousal by various characters is almost always accompanied by a heavenly chorus of voices on the soundtrack, which makes the theme's religious associations too explicit. Two moments from *Written on the Wind* stand out in a similar way. The first, accompanied by a surge in string instruments, finds Marylee (Dorothy Malone) weeping in poignant recollection of her childhood romance with Mitch (Rock Hudson) on a tree inscribed with a heart displaying their initials. The second is the blaring jazz rendition of "Temptation" that accompanies her wild dance and her father's heart attack on the stairs. In each case, film music underscores the emotion in these scenes to such an extent that it appears as an entertaining instance of the dramatic ineptitudes of previous forms—their failure to exercise verisimilar restraint and to indulge instead in rampant overdramatization.

Along with structure and style, melodrama's customary preoccupation with heterosexual romance figures importantly in its contemporary reception. The audience laughs at the line in *Casablanca* (1942), "Was it the cannon fire or is my heart pounding?" and the charged moment at the end of *Now Voyager* (1942) when Paul Henreid lights two cigarettes in his mouth and passes one to Bette Davis, because such instances appear as clichéd examples of romantic exchange. The same is true of the romances that captivated the original audiences of Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession* and *All That Heaven Allows*. In the latter film, for example, gardener Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) invites Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) to come and see the silver-tipped spruce he is growing at his house, a thinly veiled romantic invitation equivalent in the mass camp imagination to asking a woman to come up and see your etchings as a seductive ploy. Later, after having accepted Ron's invitation, Cary is in the process of ascending a staircase in the old mill on his property when a bird suddenly flies past her, causing her to scream and fall into Ron's arms. Ron kisses her and the end of the segment lingers on a cooing pigeon on the stairs. This "surprise" method of bringing together the romantic leads for their initial encounter is such a stock element that it seems to parody itself. The contentedly cooing pigeon only adds to the sense that the film plays up its romantic situations to such an extent that the romance itself loses purchase on audience identification.

As I mentioned in chapter 4, the 1980s revelation of Rock Hudson's gay identity has a powerful impact on how Sirk's films are presently seen, particularly in relation to romantic situations. His very appearance on screen in these films unfortunately elicits laughter, as do specific moments or dialogue that seem

Romance as cliché in *All That Heaven Allows*.



Ron's invitation to Cary to come over to his place and see his silver-tipped spruce.

to bring out the ironies of his position in relation to conventions of heterosexual romance. *All That Heaven Allows* is full of such moments. Some examples include: when Cary says to Ron, "And you want me to be a man?"; when Cary, concerned about whether Ron thinks he will ever find the "right girl," asks, "Or don't you think you're susceptible?"; and when, to explain why her children won't accept him, Ron tells Cary that "I'm not like their father. If you were marrying the same kind of man . . ." The droll response that accompanies these moments confirms the fact that camp audiences may be cognizant of the substantial artifice behind romantic conceits and gender roles in the melodrama without necessarily developing such awareness in progressive directions. Mass camp recognition simply translates this "incongruity" in sexual preference into the ridiculous. This recognition thus paradoxically disturbs screen and social conventions around courtship without inspiring political consciousness.

As part of the fallout from seeing romance as parody, gender roles stand in relief. From the vantage point of more liberal audiences, the film industry and society have often manipulated these roles according to traditional values, now seen as objectionable. Given the presence of stock, strong, silent masculine types such as Hudson and John Gavin, and extremes of femininity represented by Jane Wyman's passivity, Sandra Dee's innocence, Dorothy Malone's femme fatale, and Lana Turner's blonde bombshell, Sirk's melodramas lend themselves to a kind of exposé of gender stereotypes. In *Imitation of Life* when Susy (Dee) runs out on a balcony to proclaim to her mother and their party guests, "Oh, mama, look! A falling star!", or when Marylee responds to her brother's accusation that she is a filthy liar with "I'm filthy, period," the roles of virginal and debauched women, respectively, reach the level of caricature.

There are also moments in Sirk's films that seem particularly sexist to a post-feminist world. In *All That Heaven Allows*, a friend comments to Ron about Cary, "She doesn't want to make up her own mind. No girl does. She wants you to make it up for her." In *Tarnished Angels* (1958), Laverne (Dorothy Malone) parachutes from a plane as her dress blows up and conveniently reveals her lower torso for an extended period of time. Mass camp audiences interpret such moments as clear instances of common patriarchal attitudes about women's lack of self-determination and her existence as spectacle for men. Through stereotypes and attitudes, Sirk's melodramas also offer the liberal consciousness a place to exercise its political awareness about gender.

Thus, the camp transformation of each of these generic areas—subject matter, dramatic logic, style, romance, and gender—consistently relies on a comparative historical effect, supported by a post-1960s parodic mentality about vintage Hollywood forms. Audiences view melodrama's various aspects through the





Once at Ron's place, Cary is startled by a bird and falls into Ron's arms as a prelude to their first kiss.

genre's narrative and stylistic differences from contemporary modes of production that appear to have greater verisimilitude, as well as through the genre's ideological differences from more "sophisticated" contemporary value systems. Convention savvy audiences, primed through television rebroadcasts of old movies, film spoofs, soap satires, and consistent, sometimes outrageous, soap programming, experience this historical divergence at some expense to the object in question, transforming it into the ridiculous.

There is, however, more than a little irony in this process. To the contemporary eye, more recent melodramas such as the ones I have already mentioned—*Terms of Endearment*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Fried Green Tomatoes*—exhibit a dramatic realism that upholds their emotional thrust. The irony here is that these melodramas do not essentially differ from their predecessors. They demonstrate their own vertiginous reversals and coincidences (such as the successive train accidents in *Fried Green Tomatoes*), and underscore moments of dramatic intensity with an unrestrained visual and musical emphasis (for example, the cross-cutting involving the bunny boiling in the pot on the stove in *Fatal Attraction*). They are also far from free of romantic and gender stereotypes. It is



Unexpected ironies of sexual identity in *All That Heaven Allows*: "And you want me to be a man."

simply that these films have the power of currency and immediacy, due largely to their contemporary stars, settings, situations, dialogue, and subscription to a familiar filmmaking style, that helps prevent the distance necessary for mass camp appropriation.

Before concluding, it is also important to point out that many of my observations about melodrama and camp seem to accord with long-standing arguments about Sirk within the academy. These arguments have held that Sirk was a master at using the cliché as a means of undercutting romance and assaulting melodrama's typical emotional affect. In other words, his films represent a self-conscious trash aesthetic aimed ultimately at generic auto-critique. However, even if we grant the intentionality of campy excess in Sirk's melodramas, we cannot guarantee that these intentions will impress themselves on various viewing factions. As I have argued in previous chapters, Sirk's intentions have not played a role in other institutional, historical, and social provinces of meaning outside the academy. The imperatives of sensationalism and sex or realism and mass culture anxiety in the 1950s, for example, do not associate his films with a self-conscious aesthetic.



Perceived sexism in *All That Heaven Allows*: Ron's friend tells him that Cary "doesn't want to make up her own mind. No girl does. She wants you to make it up for her."

While Sirk's films may appear to some camp practitioners as knowing camp today, the mass camp sensibility often tends to assume the supreme naiveté of the dated objects within its purview. As representing disempowered modes of production, old films appear as simple, even simpleminded, to a sensibility that considers itself sophisticated and "hip" to convention. Without access to knowledge of Sirk's or other directors' intentions, the mass camp viewer approaches these films as naive examples of camp, unconscious reflections of past conventions and social values. As mentioned, mass camp's historical myopia, privileging the immediate over the distant, aids the process whereby original circumstances of production and meaning are effaced.

Mass camp responses to melodrama may thus recognize the same elements that were once intended as self-conscious artifice by Sirk. But, in the absence of this information, these elements become examples instead of an unwitting style that confirms the outdated conventionality of the past. Outdatedness may ultimately provoke a Sirkian distanciation from the tenets of melodrama; the mass



camp viewer may grasp the constructedness of romance and gender roles, for instance. But this awareness does not necessarily connect with a larger association between film and ideology; it may simply rest on a sense of superiority to the past that remains essentially self-congratulatory vis à vis one's superior spectatorial skills, one's ability to spot vintage corn. Given mass camp's availability to many as a sensibility, how spectators read the artifice of the past depends substantially on their already established, heterogeneous, lived political positions. With a Sirk film, they may respond homophobically to Hudson, with a postfeminist consciousness to gender, or with uncommitted enjoyment of cinematic anachronisms. In this way, the contemporary ideological meaning of Sirk's films is far removed from his intentions; it is dependent on the whims of the mass camp imagination as a specific kind of social and historical vision.

Mass camp represents, then, our most contemporary example of a historical operation that affects the social meaning of Sirk's films. To the potent and pervasive sensibility of mass camp, the products of the Hollywood studio system have become ancient relics whose relevance to culture as anything more than amusing instances of outdated values and conventions has long since passed.