Campy Feminisms:
The Feminism Camp Gaze in Independent Film

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Abstract

Camp is a critical sensibility and a queer reading practice that allows women to simultaneously critique, resist, and enjoy stereotypes and conventional norms. It is both a performative strategy and a mode of reception that transforms resistance into pleasure. Scholarship on feminist camp recognizes a tradition of women using camp to engage with gender politics and play with femininity. Most of the scholarship focuses on women's camp in mainstream and popular culture and how they talk back to the patriarchy. Little work has been done on feminist camp outside of popular culture or on how women use camp to talk back to feminism. My dissertation adds to conversations about feminist camp by exploring a new facet of camp that talks back to feminism and challenges a feminist audience. I examine the work of three contemporary feminist and queer independent filmmakers: Anna Biller, Cheryl Dunye, and Bruce LaBruce to explore the different ways they subvert cinematic conventions to interrupt narrative, play with stereotypes, and create opportunities for pleasure as well as critique. I argue that these filmmakers operationalize a feminist camp gaze and open up space for a feminist camp spectatorship that engages critically with ideas about identity, sex, and feminism. In addition, I consider the ways in which other types of feminist cultural production, including sketch comedy and web series, use camp strategies to deploy a feminist camp gaze to push back against sexism and other forms of oppression while also parodying feminism, ultimately creating space for resistance, pleasure, and self-reflection.

Vita

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Introduction

In 2014, feminist scholars Jack Halberstam and Juliet Williams sat on stage in Los Angeles in front of a large audience at "The Last Bookstore" (a famous real-life independent bookstore in Los Angeles) with "Toni" and "Candace," the fictional owners of the "Women and Women First" feminist bookstore (a fictional bookstore from the sketch comedy television series *Portlandia*).[1] Halberstam and Williams are both outspoken feminist scholars who publish and speak frequently on the topic of feminism and gender-related issues. Toni and Candace are fictional characters played by real-life

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[1] In an interesting turn of events adding to the layers of irony and camp, the real-life feminist community space called "In Other Words" in Portland, Oregon (where the *Portlandia* feminist bookstore sketches were filmed) officially cut ties with the show in 2016 (after *Portlandia* had been filming there for several years). In Other Words publicly criticized *Portlandia*'s production practices and feminist politics, which they didn't see as aligning with theirs. To make it very clear how they felt, In Other Words put up a sign in their storefront window that read "Fuck Portlandia!" and listed the charges against *Portlandia* underneath, citing transmisogyny, racism, gentrification, queer antagonism, and devaluation of feminist discourse. Ironically, the way some media reports about this rift between *Portlandia* and In Other Words described the conflict ended up painting the feminists at In Other Words as real-life versions of Toni and Candace's feminist camp stereotypes. In Other Words ended up closing in 2018. Melissa Locker, "Women First Invaded Los Angeles Last Night," *IFC*, June 5, 2014, https://www.ifc.com/shows/portlandia/blog/2014/06/portlandia-invaded-los-angeles-last-night;
Jordan Crucchiola, "The Real Feminist Book Store From Portlandia Has A Message For The IFC Show: "F*ck Portlandia," *New York Magazine Vulture*, September 29, 2016, https://www.vulture.com/2016/09/portlandia-real-womens-book-store-cuts-ties-with-show.html; Kristi Turnquist, "Portland Feminist Bookstore In Other Words Is Closing," *Oregon Live*, originally posted June 6, 2018, updated January 30, 2019, https://www.oregonlive.com/tv/2018/06/portland_feminist_bookstore_in.html.

comedian-actor-musician (and outspoken feminists) Carrie Brownstein and Fred Armisen. The event at The Last Bookstore involved a brief "debate" between the two pairs of feminists followed by a Q & A discussion with Brownstein and Armisen (now as themselves) and the audience. All of this was tongue-in-cheek, of course, and actually a promotional event for both *Portlandia* and The Last Bookstore.

At the beginning of the "debate," Toni, played by Brownstein, started off by expressing her anger at the fact that "the mechanism that's making me more powerful [the microphone] is shaped like a penis," to which the audience responded with roaring laughter and applause. Just as Halberstam begins to speak, Candace immediately interrupts and says that she objects with whatever they are about to say. Toni and Candace continue to slow down the discussion by taking issue with every word (not many) Halberstam and Williams are able to say in between Toni and Candace's rants. Toni and Candace have blinders on and are unable and unwilling to listen to what Halberstam and Williams have to say. At one moment, Candace makes a feminist faux pas and calls Williams "honey." This is something that Candace would normally call someone out for in the sketches, but Toni is quick to come to the rescue. Ironically, Toni ends up justifying Candace's use of "honey." After Williams remarks, surprised, "Did you just call me honey?!" Toni woman-splains that it was a reference to actual honey.

What becomes clear is that Toni and Candace are "good feminists" who can do no wrong. The presence of Halberstam and Williams there laughing (although sometimes it looks like nervous laughter) in the space of an independent bookstore and surrounded by an audience who is already "in" on the joke, in part by wearing pins made for the event that read "Woman" or "Not-Woman," makes Toni and Candace's campy feminism funny

rather than threatening or offensive. It is all one big inside joke and everyone there is "in" on it. Toni and Candace come off as comically "aggressive" and "hostile," echoing Esther Newton's claim that camp humor is a "hostile humor," a little "bitchy."[2] Although Newton's discussion of "bitchy" camp humor focuses on gay men and drag queens, the term "bitch" is also often used to refer to women, and particularly feminists. A woman is called a "bitch" when she speaks up, complains, argues, calls out problems that others deem to be "trivial." A bitch says what she is not "supposed" to say. She does not act how women are "supposed" to act. She resists how patriarchal society wants her to behave. She is, to use Sara Ahmed's term, a "killjoy." So what do we make of Toni and Candace's "bitchy" performance in a feminist space, surrounded by a bunch of feminists? What is their performance saying about feminism? How do they manage to get a bunch of feminists to laugh *with* them, *with* feminism, without bashing it? How are they using camp to talk back to feminism and engage a feminist audience?

The fact that Brownstein and Armisen are both outspoken feminists in real life (particularly Brownstein, who is a queer feminist icon and was a leader in the riot grrrl movement) builds a level of trust with the audience—"we're one of you, we're on the same team." The camp comes from both the performance and the reading of the performance—it is both intention and interpretation. Brownstein and Armisen read some types of feminists as ironic and "extra" and are intentionally camping them, performing a sort of feminist drag.

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[2] Esther Newton, "Role Models," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993): 39-53.

As Toni and Candace continue to dominate the conversation, voicing their opinions on topics ranging from whether men can be feminists, gender representation in animated kids' films, if Prince Charming is female, whether Superman is a man or a woman, both Halberstam and Williams as well as the audience continue to laugh and smile while Brownstein and Armisen performed versions of feminists who look and sound like the stereotypes of feminists that have long circulated in mainstream. Sitting across from Professor Halberstam and Professor Williams—two feminists whose ideas are taken quite seriously—Toni and Candace perform a campy version of feminism that makes us laugh because it is at once ridiculous, extreme, absurd, exaggerated, but also, whether we want to admit it or not, a little bit true. Many of us have probably encountered versions of Tonis and Candaces in real life. Do they represent all feminists out there? Of course not. Are Toni and Candace "real feminists?" Perhaps the better question is what do Toni and Candace teach us about feminism? How do Toni and Candace invite us to critically reflect on our feminist politics, what we recognize as feminism, and the ways in which we perform feminism? Real-life feminists Brownstein and Armisen's performances as fictional feminists Toni and Candace exemplify the type of self-reflexive feminist camp that talks back to feminism that I explore further in this dissertation.

In this dissertation I argue for the recognition of a facet of camp that academia has yet to explore: the ability of camp to "talk back to" and critique feminism by targeting and challenging a feminist audience. This facet of feminist camp relies in part on the artist's (and in this case filmmaker's) reputation as a feminist to establish a trust that encourages the viewer to "give it a shot" and effectively gives them permission to laugh.

This encourages what I refer to as a “suspension of feminist critique” for the feminist spectator. My concept of “suspension of feminist critique” comes from Aristotle’s notion of the “suspension of disbelief,” where the reader of a text temporarily accepts, for the sake of the text, characters and events that would otherwise seem implausible or unbelievable. Aristotle claims that it is the audience’s suspension of disbelief that delays logic, thereby allowing them to experience catharsis later on at the end of the story. It refers to an audience’s intentional avoidance of logic to accept something surreal or “unbelievable” that is presented to them in a story. This allows the viewer to access, enjoy, and engage critically with a story or an image that they otherwise might not because it is “too real” or a “bad image” (more on this later).[3] Camp functions in a similar way by captivating a spectator visually, setting a tone that is not used to tell certain kinds of stories, and presenting a sort of playfulness on the part of the filmmaker, almost a “wink” at the spectator. While Aristotle refers to suspension of disbelief as a reading strategy, something enacted by a reader, I argue that suspension of critique can also be enacted by a reader but also can be encouraged by the author (filmmaker), for example through the use of camp strategies and a camp sensibility.

I focus on the work of three contemporary independent feminist and queer filmmakers—Anna Biller, Cheryl Dunye, and Bruce LaBruce—to examine how camp functions as a tool for them to both “talk back” to the mainstream as well as “talk back” to feminist and queer subcultures. Biller, Dunye, and LaBruce’s films are quite different

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[3] “Suspension of disbelief” is often associated with Aristotle, who says that the audience’s suspension of disbelief delays logic to allow them to experience catharsis later on.

from each other in terms of visuals, characters, and storylines. However, what they have in common is that they engage with feminist discourse and use camp strategies to create different ways of seeing both mainstream ideas and feminist norms. Their work creates what I refer to as "campy interruptions" to these norms. Notably, all three filmmakers have also appeared in their own films, and do so in most of their work, which makes them stand out from other feminist camp filmmakers who stay behind the camera.

I have chosen these three filmmakers because they have primarily worked in the realm of independent film outside of Hollywood and are tied to feminist and queer art circles and political networks. There are, however, other filmmakers whose work would fall into this category. John Waters is perhaps the most famous and widely recognized camp filmmaker. Waters is a self-proclaimed feminist and his films are undeniably campy. His work is excessive and provocative, engages race and sexual politics, and explores an array of themes related to feminism. He began making movies in the 1960s, whereas Biller, Dunye, and LaBruce all came of age and began filmmaking around the same time, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Other camp filmmakers like Jamie Babbit and Angela Robinson started filmmaking around the same time, albeit a bit later in the mid-late 1990s. Although their work includes lesbian romantic comedy favorites like Robinson's *D.E.B.S.* (2004), Babbit's *But I'm A Cheerleader* (1999) and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007), both Robinson and Babbit have worked extensively in Hollywood, directing for a number of television shows and feature films. Their work is also more conventional and less experimental in terms of genre and narrative, making a lot of teen rom coms. Aside from Dunye's recent foray into directing for episodic television, all three filmmakers I explore have worked almost entirely outside of Hollywood, on the

margins and sometimes collaborating with people in the industry but maintaining an independent production, niche marketing, limited distribution, and niche fanbase. This means that Biller, Dunye, and LaBruce make films without a lot of the constraints or pressures of a capitalist movie market that feels the need to cater to a mass market (read: white, male, straight, normative, probably not feminist) in order to survive. Biller, Dunye, and LaBruce all have a dedicated fanbase (comprised primarily of feminists and queers) and are more likely to screen their films at festivals, museums, and art house theaters, and have limited distribution in terms of DVDs and streaming. This means that their audiences tend to find them, seek them out, and suggests that they might be likely to "go along for the ride" when these filmmakers camp feminism.

I argue that these three filmmakers employ a feminist camp gaze that disrupts conventional ways of looking and challenges feminist spectators. I describe a feminist gaze as a looking relation, a structure of seeing wherein the active subject filters their look through a feminist perspective. The object of the feminist gaze is an object of feminist analysis. Both "feminist" and "camp" are oppositional reading strategies, worldviews, and modes of performance. I offer up the notion of a feminist *camp* gaze to refer to the ways in which feminist filmmakers use camp to create enough distance for feminism to look back at itself, allowing for an intra-group feminist critique of feminism and in-group humor. The feminist camp gaze is similar to the masquerade and has implications for feminist pedagogy, interpellation, community building, and self-

reflection.[4] It is through a feminist camp gaze that the filmmaker simultaneously caters to and challenges a feminist audience.

The filmmakers whose work I explore here push a feminist agenda in their work while also presenting critiques of feminism. Their films interrupt not only the conventional ways we are conditioned to see and represent gender and sexuality on screen, but they also interrupt feminist and queer strategies of representation. Although feminist camp is often discussed using examples of mainstream films, television series, Hollywood stars and pop icons, these other sites like independent film, sketch comedy, and web series also offer opportunities for camp and are often more likely to offer critiques of feminism from "the inside."

To be clear, many of the films I examine present images, characters, and scenes that are typical fodder for scathing feminist critique. Some conflict with feminist political correctness. Taken at face value, the things we see in these films seem unquestionably antifeminist or at least begging for feminist critique: rape scenes, women performing for men, women fighting with each other, and a black woman enjoying mammy films and dressing up as mammy, among other images and tropes. The campiness in these films suggests to the feminist spectator to hold off on dismissing what is on screen because it looks like something we, as feminists, are not "supposed" to like. However, I would be

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[4] Here I refer to feminist film theory's concept of the masquerade, which Mary Ann Doane describes as an excessive femininity that allows the female spectator to create a distance from the image, denaturalizing it and understanding it as a performance. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

remiss if I did not add that it is probably not the campiness alone that suspends feminist critique, but also the ways in which these films are promoted (if they are promoted at all), and the reputation of the filmmakers. The combination of all of this almost relaxes the feminist spectator, promising her some kind of deeper, cathartic feminist-friendly message by the end. Moreover, many of these films initially screen at film festivals that are dedicated to feminist or queer films and have limited screenings at arthouse movie theaters, often with curated film series and introductions by film experts, in metropolitan cities. In other words, before most people see these films, there is already a context or "cushion" surrounding them. Nobody is seeing these films at the local Cinemark or AMC.[5]

This brings up the issue of accessibility of camp and the differences between mainstream and indie camp. Much of the scholarship on camp focuses on its relationship to the mainstream and engagement with popular culture. David Bergman argues that camp exists in tension with popular culture and insists that a person who can camp and/or recognize camp is on the margins, outside of the cultural mainstream.[6] Indeed, camp has functioned as a way for gay men (and lesbians), who have been typically underrepresented, misrepresented, or unrepresented in pop culture, to engage with the mainstream and create visibility for themselves. For women, who have usually been

[5] Although these films do not typically screen in commercial movie theaters, they have recently been made available, albeit intermittently, on several streaming sites. At the time I am writing this, Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* is available on Amazon Prime and Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* and *The OWLS* are available on Amazon as well.

[6] David Bergman, ed. *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

hyper-visible in the mainstream (albeit intersectional differences impact the type of visibility), camp has been a tool that allows them to play with and reappropriate femininity and gender norms. It is clear that camp is a useful (and entertaining) way to engage with the mainstream culture and hegemonic norms. Focusing on camp in popular culture is productive because it reaches mass audiences. Camp is like the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. However, because so much of the current work on camp is focused on pop culture, the mainstream, and/or mass audiences, there is still much room to explore how contemporary artists and performers are using camp outside of the mainstream and for niche audiences and this is where a lot of the feminist camp which I describe (the type that talks back to feminism) lives.

The problem with indie/non-mainstream/niche camp is that it does not reach a wide audience and thus has a much smaller reach and smaller impact. If there is a correlation between camp's subversive potential and the number of people who see it, then indie camp has a definite disadvantage compared to mainstream camp. I would like to suggest, though, that what matters might not be the size of the audience, but their relationship to camp. If camp, no matter how intentionally transgressive or subversive it may be, is consumed by viewers who don't "get it" and who are not open to it, does it still retain its subversive and transgressive potential? Camp always runs the risk of misinterpretation by those who are not "in the know." Ironically, the misinterpretation of camp often manifests in ways that naturalize and uphold the very norms that the camp was trying to undo. I discuss the limitations of camp in further detail later, specifically looking at Linda Hutcheon and Pamela Robertson's arguments about camp's dual effect. Related to this is the question of stereotypes and camp. The primary audiences for Biller,

Dunye, and LaBruce's films have already been conditioned to feminism and are thus "in the know." However, if taken out of context or read by someone not "in the know," camp always runs the risk of perpetuating the harmful stereotypes it is trying to deconstruct. The difference between whether camp upholds systems of oppression or critiques them is often the difference between a camp spectator's interpretation versus a non-camp spectator's reading.

My project is situated at the crossroads between three bodies of scholarship: camp studies, feminist theory, and film studies. This dissertation contributes to research on feminist camp as well as on independent feminist and queer cinema. Most of the films I analyze have been underexamined by academics despite the fact that these filmmakers have developed cult followings and received substantial attention from film critics and film festivals. The exception to this is perhaps Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*. The film has certainly received a lot of attention from scholars writing about experimental women's cinema, black women's filmmaking, and black lesbian films. However, most of her other films remain underexplored. Furthermore, her work has rarely been discussed in relation to camp.

I draw from several theoretical and methodological frameworks that help guide and shape my research. These fields of study are relevant to the project as a whole but also sometimes pertain to specific filmmakers or specific films. For example, ideas discussed by feminist film theorists about the gaze, spectator, and the spectacle are particularly useful for thinking about Anna Biller's work and how her camp plays with the magic and modes of visual pleasure in Classic Hollywood cinema. Furthermore, work on postfeminist discourse is also useful for contextualizing the feminist debates within

Biller's work. For my chapter on Cheryl Dunye, work by black feminist film scholars on stereotypes and oppositional modes of looking help us understand how her use of camp connects to strategies used by African Americans, and particularly black women to create visibility and negotiate representations. I also invoke feminist debates about sex and sexual consent to examine how Dunye uses camp to suspend the spectator's feminist critique and offer a feminist critique of her own. In my chapter on Bruce LaBruce, I find feminist film theory and work on queer and lesbian cinema useful for contextualizing his work and considering how he uses camp to interrupt typical "scenes of pleasure" in film. In my final conclusion chapter I explore how this facet of feminist camp extends beyond indie film into the world of feminist comedy in sketch comedy and web series. I also consider the subversive potential and limitations of parody for this facet of feminist camp in the mainstream.

Defining Camp

In 1964, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart notoriously described the barometer for obscenity exclaiming "I know it when I see it."[7] Similarly, camp is often measured by arbitrary criteria. The word "camp," as scholar David Bergman points out in the first edited anthology on camp in 1993, comes from the French word *camper*, meaning "to pose, to strike an attitude."[8] Camp has always been an elusive term that evades clear definition. Most people can describe what camp is, or point out when they notice it, but when people try to define it always seems to involve lists of criteria,

[7] Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964)
[8] Bergman, *Camp Grounds*, 1993, 6.

examples, goals, and groups who "do" camp. Esther Newton perhaps best sums up camp by describing it as an "incongruous juxtaposition."[9] Newton lists three recurring themes in camp—incongruity, theatricality, and humor—and refers to camp as a "system of humor," wherein the aim is to make an audience laugh. The incongruities are ironic and funny because they are at once true and exaggerations, twisting the truth.

When people talk about camp it often leads to the question of whether camp is an adjective (that film is "campy"), a noun (that film is "camp"), or a verb (that film is "camping"). This speaks to a larger question—whether we should locate camp with the spectator or the performer. Is camp something that performers intentionally do and a cultural object that creators intentionally make, or is camp a way that spectators interpret a performance or read a cultural object? The words "camp" and "campy" are often used interchangeably, which some see as a problem. In an article on the difference between camp and campy, J. Bryan Lowder points out that Susan Sontag's 1964 essay describes elements of campiness and things that are campy, and conflates this with camp.[10] Lowder argues that these "campy" characteristics (the "failed seriousness" to which Sontag alludes, the frivolity and excess) are not needed for something to be camp. He contends that camp is "a way of seeing the world," whereas "campy" describes the aesthetic characteristics. Similarly, Robertson describes feminist camp as a way to view the world. She suggests that feminist camp views the world "queerly," from a position that is "non- or anti-straight, albeit frequently non-gay."[11]

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[9] Newton, "Role Models," 1993, 46.
[10] Bryan J. Lowder, "Postcards From Camp: Camp is not dead! It's alive, well, and here to stay," *Slate*, April 1, 2013, https://slate.com/culture/2013/04/camp-is-not-dead.html
[11] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996, 10.

Because both camp and feminism are words that we associate with certain aesthetics, ideas, people, we refer to things as "campy" or "feminist" all the time, but the general public (and even academics) rarely agree on one clear all-encompassing definition for either term. Today, popular media uses the terms "camp" or "campy" to describe people, clothes, films, and other aspects of visual culture and performance, assuming that we all know what it is. Similarly, popular media and many people throw around the word "feminist" as if we know what it means, you know feminism when you see it, it needs no explanation. Ultimately, however, what is camp and what is feminist is up for debate. The first three key anthologies about camp, published in the 1990s, explore debates about what constitutes camp.[12] If camp is a tool for parody and destabilizing what we think we know, then using camp to parody various manifestations of feminism for feminist spectators (who would presumably recognize feminism and anti-feminism when they see it), might help us explore some of the nuances and debates within feminism.

The Politics of Camp

Scholars have been debating the aesthetic and political aspects of camp since at least the mid-twentieth century. Christopher Isherwood's 1954 novel, *The World in the Evening* is often cited as one of the earliest textual mentions of "camp." Isherwood distinguishes between "low camp" and "high camp." Low camp is excessive,

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[12] David Bergman, *Camp Grounds*, 1993; Moe Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (Routledge, 1994); Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

exaggerated, performative, and associated with male homosexuality. High camp, on the other hand, is more serious, it takes itself more seriously even if it is still gaudy, garish, and exaggerated.

In May 2019, camp was at the forefront of U.S. popular culture and mainstream media as the theme for the Met Gala. The concept of "Camp" was brought into the limelight of celebrity and pop culture when Andrew Bolton, the curator for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, designated "Camp" as the theme for the annual Met Gala. Citing Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," perhaps the most widely recognized scholarship on camp, the Met Gala challenged celebrities, fashion designers, and pop culture icons to take camp seriously.[13] The outfits at the Met Gala reflect a wide range of interpretations of camp. The focus was on camp as an aesthetic, but it was impossible to avoid the politics of camp, particularly as actress/producer/writer Lena Waithe wore a tailored suit with the words "Black Drag Queens Invented Camp" stitched on the back, highlighting the all too common erasure of queers of color from discussions of camp.

Susan Sontag's aforementioned 1964 essay did two important things for camp. One, tt solidified camp as worthy of discussion in the academic arena, and two, it pushed forth a depoliticized interpretation of camp that incited a long debate among scholars about camp's relationship to politics. To be clear, most camp scholars strongly disagree with Sontag's argument that camp is not inherently political, but rather apolitical. In her essay, Sontag effectively divorces camp from homosexuality and gay male identity and

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[13] Susan Sontag, Notes on Camp 1964. Reprint. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53-65.

culture.[14] It was not until almost two decades after Sontag's essay that camp started to become a serious topic for study in academia. The emergence of camp scholarship in the early 1990s coincides with many changes in the feminist and LGBTQ communities that occurred between then and Sontag's essay. Feminists and gay people experienced increased visibility in media, popular culture, and Hollywood (albeit still limited and often stereotypical), the lasting impact of the women's liberation and gay liberation movements, the AIDS crisis, the development of women's studies and gay studies in the academy, and the emergence of queer theory and performance studies.

Three edited anthologies on camp published in the 1990s offer a useful snapshot of camp scholarship, as many of the issues they address remain in the foreground of academic debate on camp. Both David Bergman's *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (1993) and Moe Meyer's *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994) emphasize camp as an exclusively queer practice that challenge traditional notions of gender. The essays in *Camp Grounds* explore camp as a queer aesthetic practice that is used in all varieties of queer art and literature. The essays in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* similarly stress the innate and undeniable queerness of camp and its connection to queer identity. Meyer argues that his "expanded definition of Camp, one based on identity performance and not solely in some kind of unspecified cognitive identification of an ironic moment […] means that *all* queer identity performative expressions are circulated with the signifying system that is Camp. In other words, queer identity is inseparable and indistinguishable from its processual enactment, or Camp."[15] Meyer

[14] Ibid.
[15] Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 1994, 5.

insists that there are not different kinds of camp, only a queer one. For all other "camp-like" manifestations that are not queer and, according to him not camp, he refers to them as "camp trace." Fabio Cleto's *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, published years later in 1999, offers a more extensive excavation of camp literature (providing an impressive and quite informative bibliography of writings on camp from 1869-1997) and continues to examine the queerness in camp while also exploring other avenues and camp manifestations by heterosexual women, lesbians, and pop culture.

Notably, most early camp scholarship resists an intersectional perspective and tends to leave whiteness unmarked, thus allowing the power linked to racism and white privilege to go unchecked. Robertson points out that Moe Meyer's discussion of Joan Jett Blak, an African American drag queen who ran for mayor of Chicago in 1991, focuses exclusively on the gay politics and camp in the campaign while overlooking the role of race and the significance of a black drag queen representing the Queer Nation party.[16]

Scholars like Pamela Robertson, Elly-Jean Nielsen, and Richard Dyer, among many others insist on an inherent political charge to camp.[17] In fact, most scholars who do work on camp, particularly those working in identity study fields, argue that camp is political. Robertson insists that the meaning of camp changed in the 1960s. Referring to the mainstreaming and popularization of camp, she suggests that the context in which camp is produced, how it is consumed, and who consumes it have changed.[18] Despite the

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[16] Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 1994, 20.
[17] Pamela Robertson, *Guilty. Pleasures*, 1996; Elly-Jean Nielsen, "Lesbian Camp: An Unearthing," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20, no. 1 (December 2015), 116-135; Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002).
[18] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996, 119.

fact that camp today circulates regularly in mainstream pop culture, much of camp's political power and subversive critique still exists in the "underground" and independent work of artists who are not mainstream but rather part of feminist and queer subcultures. Mainstream camp is more about visibility and revealing the artificiality and construction of hegemonic norms. Mainstream camp talks back to and exposes hegemony. Non-mainstream camp does that but also talks back to that very subculture/group that is exposing hegemony. As camp continues to be mainstreamed (coinciding with the mainstreaming of LGBTQ culture, hip-hop, feminism, etc.), "indie camp" challenges that mainstreaming and engages with the issues and debates that are now too often taken for granted.

At the abovementioned 2019 Met Gala, the fashion designers and attendees were given the task to create something "camp." Attendees wore all kinds of outfits. Some were extravagant, excessive, eccentric, others invoked fairytales, some wore outfits that were ironic, exaggerations of femininity, and others flaunted mundane tokens of pop culture. Some attendees invoked the campy with their fashion, while others also performed camp with their gestures and act outs.[19] What makes the Met Gala "camp"—the intention behind the fashion designs and performances, or the ways in which the public responded to them? Is it reception or performance/intent that determines camp? Does Lena Waithe's outfit make her a camp subject or a camp object? Is she disidentifying with camp or identifying with it? And when Lady Gaga does her multiple costume changes on the steps in front of people and cameras, a performance that is so

[19] For example, how Lady Gaga transforms herself and "sheds layers" in her performances.

undeniably campy, what is it exactly that makes it camp? Lena Waithe's outfit is a comment on race and queerness in camp. Specifically, Waithe calls out the fact that camp discourse and the writing of camp history has been dominated by white, gay, cisgender men at the expense of the "Others"—people of color, genderfluid and trans* folks, and particularly black drag queens, who have been key players in the creation, performance, and reception of camp.

The question of intentionality is almost inevitably part of any discussion about whether something is camp or not. The question of whether or not something that is camp was intended to be or not seems to be really asking whether or not the creator is in or out of the group, whether or not they are simply "ignorant" or so naive as to make something serious and intended to be realistic that it is so not-real that it is funny (then the joke is on them), or if the creators are making a comment and wanting to make the audience laugh by not taking the thing they are representing seriously to begin with. Clues as to intentionality also let the audience know whether or not they "should" be laughing. As a mode of reception, camp often involves laughing at in-group humor that others outside the group do not recognize. Camp spectators also sometimes laugh when they are not "supposed to"—when they recognize something in the text that was not intended by the creator. Fabio Cleto critiques both Meyer and Sontag for imposing binaries in camp that are rooted in intentionality. He critiques Meyer for imposing a binary between "Camp" (which Meyer argues is inherently Queer) and "Pop camp" and Sontag for insisting that

there is a "pure Camp" that is "naïve" and unintentional and "deliberate Camp" that knows it is camp and is created for the purpose of being camp.[20] Cleto writes,

> The difference between intentional and unintentional camp can be thus described as a different subject positioning, and a different arrangement of the exclusion/assimilation logic of camp: while the interpretive 'violence' of what has been labelled unintentional camp enacts a 'standing up', a superiority of the decoding subject, based on a deliberate misunderstanding, 'intentional' camp enacts the self-recognition of *understanding*. But this is an odd ('queer') sort of understanding, for it relies on puns and innuendos, and on deliberate misunderstanding, contractually agreed between the parts.[21]

Cleto's distinction between intentional and unintentional camp opens up the space for non-queer camp while also suggesting that intentional camp is almost always queer in its worldview.

Pamela Robertson shifted the conversation about camp with her groundbreaking book *Guilty Pleasures* (1996) by including women in ways they had not been included before. In most scholarship and discussions about camp, women are seen as camp objects who offer viewing pleasure and possibilities for identification for gay male camp subjects/spectators. Robertson corrects this by uncovering a tradition of feminist camp that engages in "oppositional modes of performance and reception," "views the world queerly," and "function[s] as a form of gender parody."[22] Robertson's discussion of feminist camp stretches across the twentieth century as she examines camp stars like Mae West, Joan Crawford, and Madonna, and considers women as camp subjects who derives

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[20] Cleto, *Camp*, 1999, 17.
[21] Ibid.,, 32. Cleto gives the example of a dinner party conversation where a party guest excuses himself early from the party and says "I must keep my youth," to which the party host replied, "Oh, but you should have brought him."
[22] Robertson 1996, 9-10.

pleasure from watching the stars' camp performances. What makes these camp subjects and camp objects "feminist," according to Robertson, is how they parody gender norms, particularly the ways in which they expose femininity to be an artifice, a construction, and something performative rather than innate.

Since Robertson's work on feminist camp in the mid-1990s, there has been an increase in scholarship on women and camp. Most of the scholarship on women and camp tends to focus on the ways in which women use camp to engage with or challenge mainstream popular culture. Thus, many of this work overlaps with Star Studies, Film Studies, Television Studies, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies more broadly.

In their book *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner explore what they refer to as "transgressive camp" in popular culture by looking at pop icons like Gwen Stefani and Macy Gray and television characters like Xena (Warrior Princess) and Karen Walker on *Will & Grace*.[23] Shugart and Waggoner argue that transgressive camp "mobiliz[es] conventional camp sensibilities" and involves performances that simultaneously engage with normative conventions (tropes, gender norms, etc.) while also resisting them. Like Robertson, Shugart and Waggoner center women as camp subjects and femininity as a camp object. They also suggest that "female performances of femininity might be the likeliest contemporary cultural site for camp performance in general and, perhaps, critical camp performances as well."[24]

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[23] Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008).
[24] Ibid., 5.

More recent work on women and camp includes Katrin Horn's 2017 *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture: Serious Excess*. Horn offers a definition of camp as "the inversion of taste in favor of the neglected, the other, the marginalized."[25] Like Robertson and Shugart and Waggoner, Horn also focuses on popular culture in the United States as she examines popular lesbian films *But I'm A Cheerleader* and *D.E.B.S.*, the popular television series *30 Rock*, and pop icon Lady Gaga and the ways in which they, through their use of camp, break with normative conventions and patterns of representation.

I find Horn's notion of camp as "serious excess" useful for thinking about how camp is not a reflection of disinterest or misunderstanding, but rather that a thorough understanding of something (like gender norms and conventional femininity, for example) is necessary in order to be able to subvert or "camp" it. Horn also argues that there is an inherent connection between critique and pleasure in camp. She refers to this as "detached attachment" and contends that this "enables the participation in and enthusiasm for mass culture at the same time as it stresses its shortcomings, dangers, and limitations. Feminist camp scholars like Horn, Robertson, and Shugart and Waggoner all emphasize that camp can be both a form of resistance as well as a way to access "guilty" pleasures.

Shugart and Waggoner offer a useful overview of how other scholars have described the qualities and defining characteristics of camp sensibility, which include irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor.[26] They also modify this list and offer their

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[25] Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture: Serious Excess* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 5.
[26] Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 2008, 29.

own list of characteristics: parody, irony, performance, aesthetics, and resistance. I find their list useful and use it to help define camp for the purpose of this project. Although camp is a "slippery" concept that tends to elude definition, I want to attempt to define it for this dissertation.[27] Building on definitions of camp by camp scholars, I define camp as a critical sensibility, a worldview, and a queer reading practice that engages with the politics of representation and spectatorship (and identity politics), through the use of strategies including but not limited to irony, parody, and performance that either resist or subvert normative practices.

One major debate surrounding camp is whether it is political or aesthetic. Camp is often politicized or politically-charged because of it destabilizes the status quo by revealing it to be constructed rather than innate, such as in how camp is often used to play with gender and norms surrounding femininity and masculinity. Sontag's essay acknowledges camp's relationship to gay male culture but ultimately tries to divorce camp from politics as she articulates camp as an apolitical aesthetic. Camp is typically discussed as a mode of performance and reception for subcultures. Most discussions of camp describe camp production and spectatorship in terms of identity-based subcultures. Gay scholars like Richard Dyer and Moe Meyer challenge Sontag and insist on defining camp in relation to gay male subculture and push for an understanding of camp as inherently political insofar as it is entwined with identity politics.[28] Feminist scholars like

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[27] I find Fabio Cleto's mention of the "slipperiness of camp" intriguing because it does seem that any attempt to define the term quickly starts to get "slippery" and lead to further debate.
[28] Richard Dyer, "It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,

Robertson similarly argue that camp is political, namely because it has the power to reinforce or challenge patriarchy and gender norms (and sometimes does both—reinforce and challenge—at the same time).[29] Furthermore, Elly-Jean Nielsen reclaims camp for lesbian politics and considers how, despite being left out of the discourse on camp, lesbians have long used camp to challenge both patriarchal norms and heteronormativity.[30]

Moe Meyer insists that Camp is both political and critical. Furthermore, he looks at Camp (he refers to it always with a capital "C") as an activist strategy that has been used by queer organizations like ACT UP and Queer Nation in public protests to advance a queer politics.[31] He also argues that there is an inherent relationship between Camp and queer identity because "the function of Camp [is] the production of queer social visibility," with Camp being the result of "the total body of performative practices and strategies to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility."[32]

Meyer and the other scholars in his anthology offer a narrower view of Camp as "solely a queer (and/or sometimes gay and lesbian) discourse that embodies a specifically queer cultural critique."[33] Although limiting Camp to the realm of queer politics and culture, Meyer's anthology does so in attempt to reclaim camp for queers during a

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1999); Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 1994; Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 1964.

[29] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996.

[30] Nielsen, "Lesbian Camp," 2015.

[31] Meyer, *The. Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 1994, 1.

[32] Ibid., 5.

[33] Ibid., 1.

tumultuous time for queer culture and politics in the early 1990s. Meyer insists that "all un-queer activities that have been previously accepted as "camp," such as Pop culture expressions, have been redefined as examples of the appropriation of queer praxis."[34] While Meyer's notion of "queer" refers to queer as an identity, other camp scholars have described camp as a queer practice, using "queer" to refer to a counter-normative worldview rather than an identity. For example, when Pamela Robertson says that feminist camp is queer, a queer reading practice, she means that feminist camp often challenges or toys with heteronormativity, and notes that feminist camp is often not-straight but also not-gay.[35]

Pamela Robertson argues that "by reclaiming camp as a political tool and rearticulating it within the framework of feminism, we can better understand not only female production and reception but also how women have negotiated their feelings of alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture."[36] Similarly, in her essay on parody as subversive performance, Helene Shugart examines what she refers to as "parodic performances of femininity" performed by Ellen DeGeneres, and specifically her character Ellen on her sitcom *Ellen* from the 1990s.[37] Shugart argues that these performances expose the construction of gender and the conflation of gender with sexuality.

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996, 10.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Helene Shugart, "Parody as Subversive Performance: Denaturalizing Gender and Reconstituting Desire in *Ellen*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2001): 95-113.

At face value camp can appear to blend in with the mainstream all the while mocking it and exposing its "secrets." Dyer describes camp's roots in oppression as a strategy for marginalized groups, and particularly gay men, to find each other, express themselves, and talk back to the mainstream culture that marginalizes them. Other scholars have discussed camp's reach as going beyond gay men to women, and particularly lesbians, as well. Elly-Jean Nielsen agrees that camp is linked to oppression, which is why she argues for a tradition of lesbian camp, contending that "camp sensibility is a product of oppression and oppression is a legacy for lesbian women as much as it is for gay men.[38]

Understanding camp as a survival strategy under conditions of oppression allows us to see it as a reflection of "adaptability." As Dyer explains,

> [Gays] were extremely 'adaptable,'; that is, we tend to find it easy to fit in to any occupation, set-up, or circle of people. Or rather, and this is the point, we find it easy to appear to fit in, we are good at picking up the rules, conventions, forms and appearance of difference social circles. And why? Because we've had to be good at it, we've had to be good at disguise, at appearing to be one of the crowd, the same as everyone else. Because we had to hide what we really felt (gayness) for so much of the time, we had to master the façade of whatever social set-up we found ourselves in—we couldn't afford to stand out in any way, for it might give the game away about our gayness. So we have developed an eye and an ear for surfaces, appearances, forms: style. Small wonder then that when we came to develop our own culture, the habit of style should have remained so dominant in it.[39]

I suggest that camp reflects both an effort to adapt and a refusal to do so fully. Dyer points out that adaptability has translated into the mastering of a façade. This façade

[38] Nielsen, "Lesbian Camp," 2015, 129.
[39] Richard Dyer, "It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going," 1999, 114.

certainly extends beyond gay men and is evident in African American culture (think of the cakewalk as camp parody), Latino/a/x culture (Carmen Miranda's performances, Muñoz's analyses of Carmelita Tropicana), lesbian culture (see Shugart on Ellen DeGeneres, Halberstam on Cindy Crawford and k.d. lang's Vanity Fair cover, Nielsen on lesbian camp, Sue-Ellen Case on butch-femme as camp). I add to this list what I refer to as "feminist culture," united by a shared, yet often debated, feminist identity and ideology. Feminist camp reflects the mastering of different façades—that of the "good girl," the tolerable woman subject within patriarchy, as well as the "good feminist," that is, the feminist who performs feminism in a way that adheres to certain standards (note that these standards are contextual and depend on which so-called "brand" of feminism we are talking about).

Certainly, the cultures of marginalized groups are shaped in large part by their relationship to representation and their visibility in the mainstream. Dyer asserts that it is the "invisibility" of gay men and queer culture that translates into its visibility via camp style and sensibility. While gay men have historically been rendered invisible except when hyper-visible (read: recognizable by stereotypes), African Americans have historically been hyper-visible, yet invisible in narratives, the visibility of their visual difference in relation to whiteness functioning to make them invisible in history books, mainstream culture (albeit except as stereotypes or, as Patricia Hill Collins describes, "controlling images." When Dyer says that gay men couldn't "afford" to stand out, which is why many learned to and decided to adapt, he is referring to the marginalization of "gay" in a society in which to be gay meant to be not only counter-hegemonic, but

viewed as an active threat to the status quo, something needing to be regulated and controlled.

Camp blurs the boundaries between respect and insult, between appropriation and reappropriation. Dyer contemplates the function and impact of some gay men's use of "she" to refer to each other. Is it claiming community through shared resistance to hegemonic straight masculinity, or is it perpetuating male chauvinism by putting down gay men and women as inferior?[40] As Dyer notes, much of this depends on interpretation and context. Camp may be a form of in-group humor, but at whose expense? Dyer writes,

> It [Camp] does give us (some of us) an identity, it does undercut sex roles and the dominant world-view, it is fun; but it can also trap us if we are not careful in the endless pursuit of enjoyment at any price, in a rejection of seriousness and depth of feeling.[41]

Dyer's warning that camp can be a "trap" speaks to the way other scholars describe camp as complicit with systems of power and oppression, and how camp can simultaneously be offensive and subversive, and, if used by the "wrong people" (mainstream media and people who are not themselves part of the group) it can be used against those who are marginalized. Ultimately, Dyer suggests that the difference between camp that is offensive and that which isn't comes down to context.

While scholars have established that camp performances are political, so too is looking at camp, reading camp. The process of camp spectatorship also has an interpellating effect, to evoke Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation as related to

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[40] Dyer, "It's Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going," 1999.
[41] Ibid., 116.

Ideology.[42] According to Althusser, interpellation is a process through which an individual becomes a subject in society. Working within a Marxist framework, Althusser connects interpellation to the 'ultimate condition of production,' which is the *reproduction* of the conditions of production, and requires a subject to be 'steeped in ideology' in order to continue performing the necessary tasks to sustain the infrastructure that is regulated by the superstructure's institutions. Cinema, as a part of a representation system (and discursive meaning-making system), uses its signifying systems to interpellate its spectators into/in relation to ideology.[43] For Althusser, interpellation is inextricably linked to power and authority, and it is an unconscious process. It is a process wherein various state apparatuses—both repressive and ideological—work to shape us into ideologically conditioned "good subjects."[44] His most cited example of interpellation involves the hailing by a police officer. In this example, a police officer shouts aloud "Hey you there!" and an individual physically turns around, recognizing (or believing) that they are the one being hailed (although not explicitly identified). In this

[42] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 1970; it is this interpellating function that I see as linking the processes of subject formation as spectator in cinema with that of the citizen in law. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 1970. Reprint. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Andy Blunden (Monthly Review Press, 1971).
[43] Philip Rosen discusses the significance of Althusser's interpellation to film theory in his edited anthology, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology.* Philip Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
[44] Althusser distinguishes between "repressive state apparatuses" (RSAs), which function more publically in the form of prisons, the legal system, church, and institutions connected to the State) and Ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), which function more privately in the form of family, school, and media.

process, the individual simultaneously becomes a subject and also recognizes (and accepts) that they are regulated by law.

I want to suggest that camp can facilitate subjection formation, functioning as an interpellating tool through its use of signifiers. I am particularly thinking about feminist camp and comedy. The notion of feminist camp or comedy hailing and interpellating feminist subjects is complicated by the fact that feminism is not a monolithic but layered and nuanced ideology and political and social movement. Most feminists would probably agree that the "core-root" has something to do with patriarchy and sexism. bell hooks says she offers up a "simple definition" of feminism that captures what it is really about: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression."[45] When individuals respond to the "hailing" of feminist inside jokes or parodies that talk back to sexism and patriarchy, they are interpellated as feminist subjects within an ideological framework of feminism—in opposition to sexism and actively fighting patriarchy. Even as feminist subjects are "in on the joke" together and share a broader opposition to sexism, they do not necessarily agree on everything else; there are many intra-group differences and disagreements that complicate feminist politics. Feminism has many modifiers, signaling different commitments in the group and different interpretations of what should be valued within the movement.

Feminist Camp

[45] bell hooks, *Feminism Is For Everybody* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

A key tool of camp is parody, so when someone camps feminism it might look like they are mocking or making fun of feminists. Feminists have long been mocked by the mainstream, so this may seem like nothing new. The term "feminist" has often been used to "feminist-bait," which is connected to lesbian-baiting. Feminist-baiting and lesbian-baiting function to upload patriarchy.[46] The way feminist-baiting works is by making the label "feminist" a bad word by associating feminists with "ugliness," "manhating," and "undesirably" to get women to "straighten up" and act in ways more appeasing to men. So then is camping feminism just another form of self-deprecation?

Queer comic Hannah Gadsby argues that self-deprecation is harmful for women and minorities and people on the margins.[47] In her Netflix comedy special, *Nanette*, Gadsby explains her position on self-deprecation after doing it for so long in her stand-up: "Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from someone who is already in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation."[48] Gadsby pushes for marginalized groups to stop perpetuating the same jokes about themselves and poking about themselves that the mainstream already does and that continues to keep marginalized groups on the margins. Certainly "feminists" as a group are not the same as other identity groups that have been and continue to be historically marginalized. Feminist is an ideology, a political position, but in many ways an "identity" that people carry with them. So while using camp to camp feminism may seem like self-deprecation

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[46] Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Berkeley: Chardon Press, 1997).
[47] Alison Foreman, "A New Netflix Special Calls Out Standup Comedy's Most Pervasive Bad Habit," *Mashable*, June 29, 2018, https://mashable.com/article/hannah-gadsby-nanette-comedy-special/
[48] Hannah Gadbsy, *Nanette* (Netflix: 2018), streaming.

at first glance, I want to show that it is possible to camp feminism from the inside, by feminists and for feminists, using the independent films by LaBruce, Biller, and Dunye as examples.

Camp is not only politically charged, but is also a useful tool for feminism. Feminist comedy employs camp to expose so-called "truths" as false or inauthentic (for example, an essentialist view of gender) as well as to reveal so-called feminist "exaggerations" as "truths" (for example, patriarchy). Certainly, these are connected. When mainstream society, culture, and politics advances or fails to chip away at the notion that feminists exaggerate patriarchy and sexism, among other systems of oppression, they reproduce the "truths" we come to know as "authentic" and that are made "invisible" and natural (gender essentialism, white privilege, heterosexism, cissexism, etc.). Thus, by mocking and undermining so-called "truths" (read: biases), feminist camp also uncovers the reality of patriarchy and other systems of power.

Pamela Robertson argues that feminist camp is a queer discourse because it "views the world queerly" and is "at odds with the dominant symbolic order." While other scholars describe camp as a queer discourse to try to locate it specifically and exclusively within gay and lesbian (but mostly gay white male) culture, Robertson uses a broader definition of queer to describe feminist camp as something that is flexible and counter-hegemonic, and not exclusively gay but rather able to appeal to straight women, gay men, and lesbians.[49]

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[49] Robertson, 1996, 10.

Robertson's discussion of feminist camp focuses on women performers and women spectators. She looks specifically at major stars, popular culture, and camp that is widely available and circulated in the mainstream. Her examples of feminist camp talk back to the mainstream, to Patriarchy, and the status quo. However, the term "feminist" remains unquestioned in her book. She questions whether Madonna's camp is feminist or not, but she does not challenge what constitutes "feminist," only whether or not something meets the unspoken criteria for the category. By examining independent feminist and queer cinema, I want to look at how they question, within the film, what qualifies as "feminist" and the ways they use camp as a sort of distorted mirror to reflect back to the feminist spectator different "camped" manifestations of feminist politics and ideology. Using Robertson's work on feminist camp as a foundation, I aim to expand the scope of what counts as feminist camp, what can be "camped," and what other kinds of spectators can enjoy camp and be catered to by camp. Furthermore, I want to build upon Robertson's discussion of the female camp subject/spectator to suggest that feminist camp also makes space for a feminist camp subject/spectator, which I will discuss further later in the dissertation. So while I am trying to expand Robertson's notion of feminist camp, I am also proposing a different kind of spectator for these films (the independent feminist films in the subsequent chapters). If, as Robertson describes, feminist camp challenges patriarchal norms by parodying gender, I want to argue that it can also challenge, "denaturalize," and "deconstruct" feminism by parodying feminist stereotypes and facets of feminist ideology.

Camp Subjects, Representation, and Spectatorship

Camp Studies and Feminist Film Studies are both concerned with issues pertaining to images, stereotypes, fantasies, and spectatorship. While camp often tries to play with fantasies and complicate the notion of what is real and what is fake, feminist film theory has long been concerned with deconstructing the fantasy of the cinema and complicating the pleasures of film and the tools used to make them. bell hooks's work on film sums up cinema's fantasy and pretense, referring to movies as "making magic" and explaining that "giving audiences what is real is precisely what movies do not do…[instead] they give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real."[50] Camp is at once both real and unreal. In terms of reception, it involves very real interpretations of texts and performances that are read as camp, whether camp is intentional or not. And in terms of representation, camp is an exaggerated, heightened, ironic presentation of something real. Gender is real but when gender expression is camped, it reveals the "unrealness" of it all.

Two approaches in feminist film studies, born out of the 1970s and 1980s, include a sociological approach that looks at images and stereotypes, and a psychoanalytic approach that engages with semiotics, spectatorship, and looking relations. Notably, the 1970s and 1980s mark two decades that encompassed major feminist gains, feminist visibility in the mainstream, as well as feminist backlash. This era also produced many campy pop texts, including feminist camp. Films like *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), *Barbarella* (1968), and *The Stepford Wives* (1975) are examples of some of the campy artifacts from the era that talk back to patriarchy and feminism. During this time, John

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[50] Bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (Routledge: 1996).

Waters produced camp classics like *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Hairspray* (1988). Madonna, Dolly Parton, and other pop artists, stars, and sex symbols incorporated camp into their art and personas. Surprisingly, feminist film theory during this era, despite addressing issues surrounding images and representation, does not address camp at all.

The feminist sociological approach understands film representation as a reflection of society, specifically as a reflection of how society views women.[51] Molly Haskell describes the sociological approach as being concerned with the value and legitimacy of images of women in film.[52] In the introduction to *From Reverence to Rape*, Haskell reflects on her relationship with the movies: "Like recollections of old love affairs, the images of stars that stay with us are the triumphs rather than the disappointments. We remember them not for the humiliations and compromises they endured in conforming to stereotypes, but for the incandescent moments in which their uniqueness made mockery of the stereotypes."[53] Notably, the images that Haskell holds on to are the "good" images, the "triumphs." However, she explains that the "bad" images, the stereotypes, continue to plague contemporary cinema. Haskell's relationship to the cinema is a love/hate relationship.

Similar to how Robertson describes the female camp spectator's "guilty pleasures"—deriving pleasure from images that may also sometimes be offensive to women or exaggerations of women ("bad" images)—Haskell, along with bell hooks and

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[51] Karen Hollinger, *Feminist Film Studies* (Routledge, 2012).
[52] Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 1974. Reprint (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
[53] Ibid, xi.

other feminist film scholars, still love the cinema and connect with representations of women despite cinema's "image problem." Yet, different than Robertson, Haskell differentiates between "good" and "bad" images, whereas Robertson might say that the "bad" images are "guilty pleasures" that force female (camp) spectators to negotiate their identification and desires with misogynistic stereotypes. Robertson also argues that the ability to recognize stereotypes as such is crucial to camp. She explains,

> "Camp depends on our simultaneously recognizing stereotypes as stereotypes to distance ourselves from them and at the same time recognizing, and loving, the hold and power those stereotypes have over us. It is always a guilty pleasure. Thus, the stereotypes at play in camp are recoupable. And, therefore, the positive camp effect one generation attributes to Madonna, or Mae West, or Joan Crawford, becomes, in the next, available to be used against her, to turn her into a camp object."[54]

Feminist camp involves an active listening and response and involves processes of deconstruction and reconstruction. Film Studies work by black film scholars, queer film scholars, and women film scholars, and others who examine the relationship between representation, identity, and spectatorship, are especially useful for thinking about how spectators negotiate images. However, I want to note that while there is overlap between these fields of study, there are also significant differences—historical, political, institutional—that make some of their claims specific to experiences of a particular identity group. In other words, while black feminist scholarship on representation and

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[54] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 141-42. Robertson describes Joan Crawford in particular as an example of a female Hollywood star whose public reception shifted from being viewed as a camp icon to a grotesque camp object. Robertson also examines Madonna as a camp icon and predicts (in 1996) that Madonna is on the verge of becoming a "camp grotesque," a victim of the stereotypes that she and we thought she could dismantle. Based on some of Madonna's work and the reception of it since 1996, it would seem that she has, in fact, become somewhat of a camp grotesque figure.

spectatorship is extremely useful for thinking about women or queer people in film (and there is also overlap between these categories as well), some of the issues and strategies discussed by black feminist scholars may be specific to black women, for example, and not necessarily apply to white women or gay men.

In her 1993 *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Judith Mayne describes spectatorship as the sum of or dialectic between the actual viewer and the theoretical addressed subject position. She characterizes spectatorship studies as an exploration of the causes and effects of the friction between "subjects" and "viewers." Thus, spectatorship is created by the tensions between the differences between the viewers and the presumed fixed category of the subject. Moreover, it involves a deciphering of the recognizable but inherently unstable "codes" that must be filtered by audiences and whose meaning shifts depending on context.

To that note, Jacqueline Stewart's notion of "reconstructive spectatorship" helps us think about the spectator's negotiation process. Stewart uses the phrase "reconstructive spectatorship" to describe an active process of fluidity, negotiation, and heterogeneity, and layering that recognizes the potential pleasures a spectator may experience by allowing oneself or refusing to get lost in the images on screen.[55] She asserts that African Americans carved "literal and symbolic" spaces for black spectatorship by reconstructing their individual and collective identities "in response to the classical system's moves

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[55] Jacqueline Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves?: Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 29, No. 4 (2003): 650-677; Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

toward narrative integration and in the wake of migration's fragmenting effects."[56] Reaching beyond the confines of the "positive images debate," Stewart explores how cinematic representations of African Americans, despite being overwhelmingly crude, stereotypical, and regressive, contributed to black urbanization and modernization, and how the cinema offered a space where recently migrated African Americans were not passive consumers but agents and active subjects who engaged *with* the images on screen.[57]

Scholarship on stereotypes in film and media is often framed by what queer studies scholar J. Halberstam refers to as the "positive images debate" (1998, 179). In representation studies, the positive images debate refers to an approach involving the evaluation of images in relation to the dichotomous categories of "positive" and "negative." Whether or not an image is determined to be "good" or "bad" rests largely on its relationship to stereotypes. If an image appears "stereotypical" it is usually considered to be a "negative" representation, and if it transgresses a common stereotype (usually by instead assimilating to dominant race, gender, and class norms), then critics and audiences typically read the image as "positive," as representing the group well. It should be noted that the positive images debate specifically refers to the representation of racial and ethnic minorities, women, and sexual minorities. Rarely do you see representation of white straight men evaluated in terms of "positive" or "negative" images, in part because images of them tend to exhibit "desirable" qualities that not only adhere to but define social norms and desirable qualities and because individual white straight men are not

[56] Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves?," 653.
[57] Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 2005.

expected to speak for their entire social group. Also because any "negative" images of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality are almost always accompanied by another redemptive "positive" image that represents hegemonic ideals. Unlike stereotypes of women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities, images of whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality have not historically been used to oppress those groups or reduce them to flattened representations.

Feminist film studies, along with queer film studies, African American film studies, and other marginalized groups tend to push back against "bad" images that misrepresent the group. But the issue is not so black and white; it is more complicated than good vs. bad images. Sometimes the distinction between a "good" and "bad" is blurry. What counts as a bad image is not necessarily fixed but rather relational and contextual. Thus, the weakness in Haskell's work is that she assumes too much. She assumes that the stereotypes of women are mentions are inherently negative. More recent scholarship in film studies moves beyond the good/bad image dichotomy and considers the identificatory potential in stereotypes and the problem with centering any critique on the question of whether an image is good or bad.

Today the term "stereotype" evokes a negative connotation, where a "stereotype" denotes something harmful, offensive, even oppressive, and "to stereotype" effectively means to discriminate and do harm to someone or a group. Earlier use of the term, however, serves a different purpose. The word "stereotype" appears as early as 1922 in reporter and political commentator Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, where he describes stereotypes as tools of interception and ways of organizing society and filtering the world. These "types"—some solidified more than others—are not static, but can shift

in meaning and application depending on context and circumstance, although the molds are often hard to break. Generally accepted types function to "intercept information on its ways to consciousness" and shape how we understand ourselves and others. Although the terms "types" and "stereotypes" are sometimes used interchangeably and both refer to molds that we reproduce and from which we derive meaning, *stereotypes* carry heavier weight and refer to power-infused molds that are harder to break.[58]

Lippmann used the term "stereotype" to refer to a deeply ingrained image that is quickly and easily reproduced, meant to filter identities and ideologies, but not inevitably oppressive. As a journalist, Lippmann invoked the image of a type of printing plate used in printing presses, a deeper and more durable plate called a "stereotype." For Lippmann, the power of stereotypes lies in their ability to solidify meaning for us before we even "take in" that which we are assigning meaning. Yet this power is not absolute. Because stereotypes are "man-made," Lippmann hints that there are often clues and contradictions that reveal the constructed nature of stereotypes and their "false absolutism."[59] Like the repurposing of stereotypes used in printing presses, stereotypes applied to social groups can also be remolded, reshaped, and repurposed to produce different images that meet the current needs.

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins argues that there is a correlation, even causation, between stereotypes and oppression.[60] She asserts that portraying African

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[58] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922. Reprint (Simon and Shuster, 1997), 57.
[59] Ibid, 86.
[60] Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: NYU Press, 2004);

American women as their stereotypical character types (mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and "hot mommas") contributes to their oppression. This is why she claims that Black feminist thought has, at its core, long been invested in challenging these "controlling images."[61] Collins locates part of the "problem" of these images in African American "acceptance" of them, if even by default for not actively challenging them. Moreover, she places responsibility on the schools, news media, cinema, the internet, and government agencies (Althusser's repressive and ideological state apparatuses), claiming that it is often in these sites where these controlling, harmful images are reproduced.[62] Collins's proposed strategy for combatting these images involves confronting the institutions (including African American institutions) that perpetuate them and thus, in Collins's view, also perpetuate b lack women's oppression. Echoing Hill Collins, political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry describes stereotypes as tools of oppression that perpetuate myths about black women's lives. These myths, she explains, have real consequences for black women, influencing how they view themselves, often making them feel ashamed, and negatively affecting their participation in politics and how they are (or are not) viewed as citizens.[63]

It is important to note that while stereotypes are linked to oppression, as tools used to oppress by controlling the images of a group of people, stereotypes also sometimes function as tools for revealing realities. Sometimes stereotypes work to make

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Michele Wallace, "Negative/Positive Images" in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (Brooklyn: Verso Books), 1990.

[61] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 1990. Reprint (Routledge, 2008), 76.

[62] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 93.

[63] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 97.

realities invisible, but sometimes they function to make realities very obvious and undeniable. Ultimately, however, context and the particularities of the group being stereotyped are make all the difference. Legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon also links stereotypes to oppression, but unlike Harris-Perry she draws parallels between reality and stereotype. Challenging the common cultural distinction made between "representation" and "reality," MacKinnon urges us to consider how representation often speaks to, influences, and even *is* reality, referring to how pornographic images of women reproduce the very relationships of women's subordination and objectification that define a patriarchal, sexist society (1993). She explains that the problem with representation is not so much in what it says or what it shows per se, but what it does and the impact that has everyday lives. MacKinnon's "radical feminist" position is concerned with the ways in which representations of women function to uphold patriarchy by normalizing subordination. This differs from the "liberal feminist" position that views stereotypes as "distortions" rather than reflections of an oppressive structure. Critiquing the liberal feminist position, MacKinnon explains that "distortion" implies that there is something preexisting or "pure" to distort.[64] However, if "distortion" is the problem, then the answer is to replace the "false" images with "real" ones, which ultimately leaves in tact the power dynamics in place that create the "distorted" images in the first place. Instead, MacKinnon insists that to undo the oppressive power of stereotypes, we must transform the meaning of the images and the types themselves.[65] Feminist debates about

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[64] Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 118.
[65] Ibid.

pornography and consent, and particularly MacKinnon's radical feminist position on pornography are useful for thinking about feminist camp's parody of stereotypes as well as the possibilities and potential limitations of feminist pornography's depictions of female pleasure and sexuality. As shown by the work of Collins, hooks, Francis, and Stewart, black feminist scholars have shaped how we understand stereotypes and their function in society and culture. Furthermore, feminist film theory and queer film theory, as well as queer of color critique, also offer useful frameworks for complicating and interrogating stereotypes in representation and reception.

Queer scholars build upon and further complicate black feminist and feminist film theorists' discussions of stereotypes and their function. Scholars like Richard Dyer, J. Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz complicate our understanding of the "positive images debate," that is, the push for "positive" representation, and offer different ways of thinking about stereotypes as a means through which to build community for identities otherwise rendered "invisible" or forced into silence by offering a means through which to recognize others who are similar to you and practice a shared verbal and visual language and aesthetic. J. Halberstam reminds us that early gay and lesbian film criticism also focuses on evaluating the quality of images in relation to how much they do or do not resemble gay stereotypes.[66] However, Halberstam worries about the consequences of pushing for "positive" images as a means to improve representation, explaining, "The desire for 'positive images' places the onus of queering cinema squarely on the

[66] Judith Halberstam, "Looking Butch: A Rough Guide to Butches on Film," in *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 175-230.

production rather than the reception of images […] mak[ing] representation into a kind of unmediated event that shows either truth and reality or else skewed versions of them."[67]

Halberstam, echoing gay film studies scholar Richard Dyer, also reminds us that what constitutes a "positive" image is not any concrete or stable quality. Rather, what is deemed positive versus negative is inextricably linked to politics, power, and ideology; dominant social groups define cultural norms and dominant ideology, which transfers as power to determine what "good" images look like. Similarly, black feminist cultural critic Michele Wallace writes in her 1990 *Invisibility Blues* about problems with the binary opposition of positive and negative images, noting a particular negative impact this has on black women's cultural production. Wallace explains that the push for positive images in black cultural production conflates "positive" with mainstream (white) cultural values and gender norms. It also assigns black cultural producers the responsibility to "uplift" the race with assimilating images that minimize any cultural differences between African Americans and the mainstream (white) culture. Thus, when black women create texts that expose issues like homosexuality, sexism, or domestic violence in the black community, those images are often labeled "negative" representations. Like Halberstam, Wallace also warns against placing too much onus on African American cultural producers to represent "well" as she alludes to the role of audience reception in affecting how we understand representation.

Scholars further complicate our understanding of stereotypes by showing how disidentification works as a strategy for identity formation, community building, and

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[67] Ibid., 179.

pleasure amid otherwise seemingly oppressive controlling images. Performance Studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz, working at the intersection of Ethnic/Latinx Studies, Gender Studies, and Queer Theory in the field of Queer or Color Critique, offers a useful theory of *disidentification* that complicates Althusser's theory of subject formation and the work of French linguist Michel Pêcheux.[68] *Disidentification*, Muñoz explains, is another way in which individuals deal with dominant ideology that does not involve strict assimilation or opposition to it, but recognizes an in-between:

> To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations.[69]

Feminist film scholar Jane Gaines engages with Muñoz's concept of disidentification, noting its use as a survival strategy for those who experience a "doubleness" as marginalized bodies in a culture and society not intended to render them visible other than as fetishized objects.[70] Gaines praises Muñoz's "disidentification" for acknowledging the mix of pleasure and danger in identificatory processes and for also

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[68] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[69] Ibid., 12. In this same chapter, Muñoz offers the example of lesbian Latina comedian Marga Gomez's interpellation as a lesbian through television images to show how disidentification can interfere with one's interpellation as a normative subject through the reappropriation of signs and signifiers.

[70] Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001): 34-37.

capturing ambivalence in dis/identification. However, she challenges its transformative reach, asserting that Muñoz's turn to Althusser and Pecheux elicits an accommodation within dominant ideology. In other words, disidentification may recognize agency within an oppressive representational system, but it does not work to undo the system that creates the need for disidentification in the first place. I suggest that disidentification serves as a main strategy for feminists to consume and derive pleasure as spectators of popular culture, and also that feminist camp that *camps* feminism, as an active reflection of and commentary on feminist spectatorship, does the work of performing disidentification, and that that is what fuels a lot of the humor and makes it recognizable to feminists.

As mentioned earlier, another approach in feminist film theory that dominated the 1970s and 1980s and continues to impact feminist film studies today is a psychoanalytic approach that focuses more on spectatorship and looking relations than on images and stereotypes. I want to briefly engage with psychoanalytic feminist film theory's discussion of looking relations to consider how we might think about spectators and viewing pleasure in camp.

Laura Mulvey's 1975 "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Pleasure" is now considered a foundational text that, at the time, signaled a watershed moment that opened the floodgates for new criticism and engagement with film theory from various directions. As Mulvey famously appropriated psychoanalytic theory as a "political weapon" to "demonstrat[e] the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form," she invoked a discussion of the how the cinematic apparatus and Classic Hollywood Narrative Cinema fosters an active/male spectator position (as the controller of the gaze)

and a passive/female object who serves as an erotic object for the male character/spectator and signifies the threat of castration that plagues the male spectator and forces him to grapple with this threat through two avenues of escape: voyeurism or fetishism. Mulvey's abstract "Woman" is limited because her emphasis on sexual difference comes at the expense of other differences (race, sexuality, class), which are unmarked and unacknowledged.[71] Mulvey's prioritization of sexual difference in her film theory contributes to the larger white-feminist blindspots in feminist media, politics, and activism. In focusing her critique of Classic Hollywood on the *phallocentric* cinematic apparatus and the patriarchal system of representation which privileges male/masculine ways of constructing meaning and significance, Mulvey seems to miss or overlook how that same system also works in conjunction with white supremacy and heteronormativity. Indeed, the cinematic apparatus and the Hollywood system of representation it creates is a phallocentric, heteronormative, white supremacist apparatus.

Despite its celebration and its solidification in feminist film studies and film theory more broadly, many feminists took issue with Mulvey's essay for several reasons: (1) the ahistoricity of her argument and analysis, in part due to her psychoanalytic framework, (2) her conflation of all women under the abstract "Woman" in psychoanalytic theory, and (3) her rather pessimistic view on Hollywood, affording women virtually no space for pleasure in Classic Hollywood cinema, urging women to find recourse in a radical, avant-garde cinema. Reading Mulvey from an intersectional, black feminist perspective, bell hooks discusses the racial implications of Mulvey's male

[71] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

gaze theory and points out how Mulvey's racial blindspot weakens her argument and exposes the unmarked whiteness in her feminist politics.[72] hooks explains,

> Watching movies from a feminist perspective, Mulvey arrived at that location of disaffection that is the starting point for many black women approaching cinema within the lived harsh reality of racism. Yet her account of being a part of a film culture whose roots rest on a founding relationship of adoration and love indicate how difficult it would have been to enter that world from "jump" as a critical spectator whose gaze had been formed in opposition.[73]

hooks's critique of Mulvey also speaks to the larger issue of (white) feminism centering white women's voices and experiences in the feminist movement and in feminist theory (and often a certain kind of white womanhood—white, straight, middle-class, able-bodied, and cisgender). In this same essay hooks refers to black women's reading/viewing practices as "oppositional spectatorship." I explore hooks's concept of the oppositional gaze and oppositional spectatorship further when I look at Anna Biller's films and Cheryl Dunye's films, in Chapters One and Two, respectively. I suggest that the oppositional gaze is a form of camp reading practice that recognizes the co-existence of critique and pleasure.

In part as a result of the critiques of Mulvey, feminist film theory turned to the question of the female spectator. Thus, feminist film theory splintered when some scholars decided that "The Spectator" as an abstract concept was not as useful for understanding women's relationship to film as exploring the various ways that difference created a multitude of spectators who might not be accounted for in an abstract

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[72] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," 1992. Reprint in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, Routledge, New York (2003): 94-104.
[73] bell hooks, *Reel to Real*, 267.

psychoanalytic framework. bell hooks insists that the gaze is political, that looking is political because not everyone was supposed to or "allowed" to look, citing examples including African American men who were punished for looking at white women, and children who are scolded for looking at adults.[74] Thus, hooks contends that looking is inextricably linked to power relations. She builds upon Manthia Diawara's notion of "resisting spectatorship" to argue that black female spectators in particular developed an "oppositional" relationship to cinema that involves looking when you are "not supposed" to look, critically engaging with the images on screen by looking back, looking critically, not taking representations at face value, exerting agency by actively looking and not merely passively consuming, and thus interrogating the images and their messages.[75]

Queer scholars have built upon and challenged feminist theories of the gaze, and explored other possibilities for identification and spectatorship. For example, Halberstam examines lesbian and queer female representations to consider the possibilities for a queer gaze.[76] Halberstam describes the queer gaze as a looking relation that invites and caters to multiple identificatory spectator positions, which thereby disrupts the traditional gaze structures, including the male gaze.

The concept of the "masquerade," as discussed by feminist film theorists, is useful for thinking about female camp spectatorship. Mary Ann Doane's 1982 "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" appeared in *Screen*, the same journal that

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[74] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze," 1992.
[75] Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Seventh Edition. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[76] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1998.

published Mulvey's seminal essay just several years earlier.[77] Doane's work, like Mulvey's, is entrenched in psychoanalysis and, like Mulvey, addresses the "problem" of sexual difference by suggesting that there are possibilities for a female spectatorship position, which Mulvey's active/passive dichotomy does not take into account. However, because Woman, as that which is signified (her meaning is sexual difference), lacks the necessary distance from the image of woman on screen (the object of the gaze), she is unable to assume the role of voyeur or fetishist like the male spectator. Instead, she can distance herself from the image by adopting the masculine spectator position (Doane refers to this as "transvestitism"). Or, she can—given her close proximity to the image—turn her look into a becoming where she adopts a masochistic over-identification with the image.

One of Doane's options for the female spectator is for her to "masquerade"—to wear an excessive femininity as a "mask" that then enables a more active spectatorship—is of particular relevance to feminist camp. Doane writes, "The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, productive, and readable by the woman."[78] The point is, as Doane insists, that the intellectual (and critical) woman who looks and analyzes and usurps the gaze poses a threat to an entire system of representation.[79]

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[77] Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no. 3-4 (Sept/Oct 1982): 74-88.
[78] Ibid., 32.
[79] Ibid., 27.

In her discussion of gender parody as part of feminist camp, Robertson argues that the masquerade can be self-conscious and the trope of the masquerade helps describe camp's negotiation between textual address and the viewer such that it is a "give and take." For Robertson, the (female) camp spectator does not, as Doane suggests, need to necessarily distance herself from the image. Rather, the camp spectator might derive pleasure—albeit sometimes a "guilty pleasure" as Robertson notes—precisely because of her proximity to the image.

I want to build upon Robertson's notion of a female camp spectator/subject to propose another type of spectator/subject, particularly relevant to contemporary feminist and queer independent cinema that camps feminism for feminists: the feminist camp spectator. In doing this, I do not want to lump all feminists into one monolithic static category as if they were all the same, but rather to explore the ways in which these texts cater to, maybe even interpellate, a feminist subject. The films clearly expect a feminist spectator—the marketing, the storylines, the characters, and the filmmakers all contribute to that. At first glance the films are "by feminists, for feminists." Yet, in the films the expectations are subverted—feminism is camped, not presented at face value. Feminist camp spectators aren't so much disidentifying as they are being challenged to actively question and negotiate what's on screen. Muñoz's description of disidentification entails a "survival strategy" for minority groups to engage with mainstream texts that are not trying to cater to minorities. However, the feminist camp spectatorship I am talking about is different than Muñoz's disidentification in that these independent feminist and queer films *are* made for the feminist subculture.

Robertson notes that most theories of the female spectator view female spectatorship as an "either/or hopscotch between positions of identification."[80] These theories still prescribe the active viewing position as masculine and the position of the object on screen as passive and feminine. With these models, female spectators can only "travel" to the positive of active viewer if they adopt a "masculine position."[81] Camp disrupts all of this by offering different possibilities for the spectator. Robertson explains that "camp offers a slightly different model of negotiation to account for the overlap between passivity and activity in a viewer who sees through, simultaneously perhaps, one mask of serious femininity and another mask of laughing femininity."[82] This opens up female pleasure. Instead of a narrow view of female pleasure as a "consciously resistant activity or a wholly passive manipulation," camp "opens up new possibilities for describing the kinds of pleasure a female spectator might take in mass-produced objects that seem to support an oppressive patriarchal sexual regime."[83] I want to suggest that camp not only creates space for women to enjoy mainstream mass culture, but also creates space for feminists to critique feminism without dismissing it. We tend to think of feminists resisting mainstream culture and celebrating, deriving pleasure from feminist "corrections" to the mainstream. This leaves very little space for feminists to enjoy feminism without agreeing with it all of the time or dismissing it altogether.

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[80] Robertson, *Guity Pleasures*, 15.
[81] Robertson offers Joan Riviere's discussion of the "intellectual woman" and Laura Mulvey's discussion of the "transvestite moviegoer" as examples of this.
[82] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 15.
[83] Ibid.

According to Robertson, feminist camp functions as a queer discourse. She uses "queer" loosely to suggest that the "queer" resides in feminist camp's parodies of gender and gender flexibility that reveal gender to be socially constructed. Robertson's loose use of "queer" works for her examples of feminist camp, which she deliberately limits to straight white women, and serves her goal of decentering "gay" (and specifically gay men) as camp subjects. For her, queer means in-between, non-normative, flexible. J. Halberstam similarly describes "the queer gaze" as a flexible spectator position that opens up the possibility for "unconventional or perverse channels of pleasure."[84] In her analysis of the August 1993 issue of *Vanity Fair* featuring a provocative photo of k.d. lang and Cindy Crawford—both icons of different kinds of female sexuality—on the cover and inside, Halberstam explains that the images disrupt the traditional gaze by offering different points of access to pleasure. The queer gaze allows for and opens up different identificatory spectator positions wherein a male spectator might access pleasure through the butch lesbian k.d. lang's point of view as she looks at Cindy Crawford's breasts in the frame. Additionally, a female spectator might access pleasure by identifying with the active Crawford who is pursuing lang with her gaze and also being looked at in return. The way the photos are constructed offer multiple entry points. Similarly, the camp gaze offers multiple ways to access pleasure, whether through resistance to mainstream norms of femininity or by identifying with and enjoying those same norms.

[84] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1998.

The filmmakers whose work I explore in the following chapters provocatively camp feminism and, I want to suggest, queer the feminist spectator by destabilizing her relationship to feminism. The films' camp worldview and camp aesthetic create this destabilization. Thus, the feminist camp gaze opens up the space for feminism to be a camp object and a camp subjectivity. The elements of feminism and the feminist "types" on screen look familiar but the camp makes it feel as if it is anti-feminist, or a mockery of feminism. So what is the feminist spectator to do? Does she take what is on screen seriously, at face value, these exaggerated stereotypes and extreme manifestations of feminist ideology that look like something right-wing anti-feminist extremists say about feminists? Or does she refuse to take it seriously and laugh? Does she identify with the camped image of feminism or distance herself? Either way, she has to reconsider and renegotiate her own ideas about feminism. Feminist camp spectatorship is a type of resisting, oppositional spectatorship that locates pleasures in resistance and recognition, in the disidentification with mainstream culture as well as, at times, feminism.

Chapter Breakdown

The following three chapters are case studies of three filmmakers whose films are undeniably campy and "play" with feminism. They use camp to critique patriarchy as well as to talk back to feminism. In Chapter One, I explore Anna Biller's work and specifically her feature films *VIVA* (2007) and *The Love Witch* (2016). Anna Biller is an independent filmmaker who self-identifies as a feminist and has spoken about being committed to making feminist films that explore women's sexuality. On the website for

her production company, Anna Biller Productions, she says she makes "fabulous films about men, women, and love."[85] In my analysis of the films, I explore how they operationalize a feminist camp gaze that manipulates cinematic techniques to repurpose the spectacle for feminist camp. In addition, I explore how the films play with tropes, visual excess, and notions of liberation that engage with feminist and postfeminist discourse about women, sex, romance, and power. In Chapter Two I examine Cheryl Dunye's work, focusing on *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and *The OWLS* (2010), as well as looking at *Mommy Is Coming* (2012) to consider the ways in which she uses camp to re-present stereotypes, complicate identity, reorient the spectator. In Chapter Three I explore Bruce LaBruce's *The Misandrists* (2017) and *The Raspberry Reich* (2004). Both films are satirical parodies that poke fun at extremist ideologies and the people who promote them in the name of revolution. *The Raspberry Reich* is considered a precursor to *The Misandrists* and follows a radical group led by a revolution-obsessed female leader (the same actress plays the leader in both films). The film uses cinematic techniques to manipulate the spectator's gaze for a camp effect. *The Misandrists* is a feminist critique of feminism, with the goal of building a stronger feminist queer politics. I explore the ways in which the film camps the stereotype of the feminist "manhater" or "misandrist" and takes radical feminism and lesbian separatism to exaggerated farcical extremes, often for comedic effect. In doing this, the film engages with feminist debates about trans inclusion, women-only spaces, pleasure, and pornography. The conclusion chapter stretches beyond the scope of independent cinema to briefly consider other spaces

[85] Anna Biller Productions, https://www.lifeofastar.com/

where feminist camp thrives today, specifically feminist comedy in the form of sketch comedy and web series and suggest that there is plenty more research to be done in this fruitful area of study.

Chapter One: Anna Biller's Retro-Feminist Camp Reimaginations

Anna Biller is a self-proclaimed feminist filmmaker and cinephile who strives to use movie "magic" to "insert a feminist gaze" into cinema. She describes herself on Twitter as a "Filmmaker and cinephile dedicated to classic Hollywood and foreign cinema," which might seem ironic considering classic Hollywood is more often critiqued by feminists than enjoyed by them.[1] Biller's campy sensibility—as a camp spectator and a camp filmmaker—creates a lens through which she is able to simultaneously critique and enjoy classic Hollywood films. Rather than rejecting Hollywood's conventional narratives and tropes, she reimagines them using a feminist camp gaze. Whether or not audiences "get" or "like" Biller's films tends to say more about the viewer's relationship to camp than about the durability of Biller's feminism. Biller's films employ a camp sensibility that drives the visual aesthetics and narrative tone while she explores new takes on familiar tropes—the deflowered virgin, the bored housewife, the liberated woman, and the hopeless romantic—from a feminist perspective. The films' campiness, paired with Biller's feminist subject matter, encourages a suspension of feminist critique that might otherwise render the films "bad" or "not-feminist."

In this chapter I examine Anna Biller's films as an example of feminist camp that talks back to feminism. Biller does this primarily by engaging with Laura Mulvey's male

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[1] https://www.twitter.com/missannabiller

gaze theory and the subsequent debates around it which have shaped feminist film theory. Biller both aligns herself with Mulvey and challenges Mulvey's male gaze theory and her prescriptions for feminist cinema. Biller also challenges Mulvey's dismissal of Classical Hollywood cinema as a harmful, essentially anti-feminist space for women. Like Mulvey, Biller is troubled by women's representation in Classic Hollywood cinema. Unlike Mulvey, who argues for the destruction of visual pleasure and claims that avant-garde filmmaking to be the best solution, Biller wants to retain the "magic" and visual pleasures of Classic Hollywood, but for a female gaze rather than a male one. In other words, Mulvey wants to tear down the "master's house" (Hollywood cinema and its conventions), whereas Biller wants to use the "master's tools" to create feminist cinema. In fact, part of Biller's larger project of feminist filmmaking involves her challenging the notion that the master's tools (the conventions, techniques, codes) belong to the master, since Biller is able to use and manipulate the same techniques to construct a feminist gaze. Even as Biller recreates the male gaze structure—the active/male subject—passive/female object dichotomy, she subverts it with interruptions, visual distractions, and juxtaposing images with feminist-charged dialogue. Biller is herself a camp spectator who reads classic Hollywood cinema queerly, as a feminist. Her feminist camp identificatory position allows her to derive pleasure from classic Hollywood images even as she critiques them. Thus, her films recreate the magic of classic Hollywood while subverting it, camping it, for a feminist politics.

Biller's films capture the visual glamour of classic Hollywood cinema. Glamour, of course, is part of the allure of Hollywood. Notably, white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies have been upheld and naturalized in the name of "glamour." Richard Dyer

notes that Early feminist film theory scrutinized the system of glamour—upheld by the male gaze—and charged Hollywood with being an extension of the patriarchy and bad for "women," all while neglecting to discern how race and other systems of power played into notions of glamour and Hollywood's system of representation. Biller engages with feminist film theory and plays with anxieties about gender and sexuality in her films, but her messages about race tend to be subtle and a bit fuzzy. While Biller challenges and complicates feminist film theory's stances on the gaze and spectatorship, her films also reproduce, to an extent, some of the excessive whiteness and race blind spots that plague classic (and contemporary) Hollywood and early feminist film theory.

Later in the chapter I discuss the ways in which Biller's feminist camp gaze plays with racial difference and talks back to the whiteness of glamour through subtle nods in jokes, casting choices, and character dialogue. Biller is a mixed-race Asian/White (Jewish) woman but because of her surname (the generic-sounding "Biller" which signifies European rather than Asian heritage), her physical appearance, and the general whiteness of her films (characters, settings, etc.), she tends to be read as white, or sometimes as racially ambiguous. This puts Biller in a flexible, albeit complicated, position when it comes to Hollywood and glamour. Indeed, Biller's presence on screen, front and center, amid a sea of whiteness stands out as different, even if she is not explicitly identified as different within the context of the narrative. In other words, Biller's racial difference on screen makes a difference visually (to the extent that viewers are able to read her as non-white, Asian, or mixed-race), but makes no difference narratively. Nevertheless, Biller's mixed-race identity informs her feminist camp gaze, through which she indirectly invokes critiques of racism and white-centrism in cinema;

however, race is not explicitly discussed or directly engaged with in the moments where she uses camp to talk back to feminism.

Anna Biller was born and raised in Los Angeles in an artistic family, one of four kids. Her mother, Sumiko Biller, is a Japanese-American fashion designer and her father, Les Biller, is an acclaimed artist who has taught art at several colleges and whose paintings have been exhibited across the United States and abroad. One of her siblings, her sister Francesca Biller is an artist, comic, and investigative journalist who publishes fiction and non-fiction about Japanese-Jewish American identity, history, and comedy.[2] Anna Biller has written on her blog about her experiences working at a Japanese hostess bar in Hawaii when she was 19 years old and studying at the University of Hawaii for one semester. Biller completed her undergraduate studies at UCLA with a degree in art and earned her MFA in art and film from CalArts. Her early work includes her short films (1994-2001) she produced as a film student and which were shot on 16mm film. For this film Biller created elaborate staged sets and costumes, and often starred as a

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[2] Rachel Raskin-Zrihen, "Japanese-Jewish American Woman Explores Many Talents," *Times Herald Online*, February 4, 2014, https://www.timesheraldonline.com/2014/02/04/japanese-jewish-american-woman-explores-many-talents/; Anna Biller, "My Mother: A Fashion Designer Who Turned Me On To Classic Movies," *Anna's Blog*, April 25, 2016, http://annabillersblog.blogspot.com/2016/04/my-mothera-fashion-designer-who-turned.html; Anna Biller, "The Horrors of the Japanese Hostess Bar," *Anna's Blog*, January 1, 2017, http://annabillersblog.blogspot.com/2017/01/the-sexist-horrors-of-japanese-hostess.html; "Anna Biller," *IMDb*, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0082366/bio; For a quick summary of her early films (available to stream for purchase on Vimeo), see "Anna Biller 16mm Shorts," *Roxie*, https://www.roxie.com/ai1ec_event/anna-biller-16mm-shorts/?instance_id=

leading character. She frequently collaborates with filmmaker and actor Jared Sanford, who has contributed to many of Biller's films in some capacity, either as a writer, producer, and actor. Biller moved to 35mm film for her feature films *VIVA* (2007) and *The Love Witch* (2016).

My experience viewing Biller's *The Love Witch* for the first time, in a theatre with about 130 people, helped me experience first-hand how this facet of feminist camp (which challenges a feminist audience and critically engages with feminism) "turns off" some viewers and "draws in" others. Moreover, that screening of *The Love Witch* was the first time I experienced a sense of community as a feminist camp spectator in a theater with others—some who felt similarly addressed and "got it," bonding over the in-group humor, but most who did not. I had previously enjoyed other films that addressed a feminist camp spectator, like *But I'm A Cheerleader* and *The Watermelon Woman*, but my initial viewings of those films happened not in theaters or public screenings with other people but by myself watching the film on a tv screen, by myself at a library, or on my laptop at home. This screening of *The Love Witch* was for students and faculty, all filmmakers of some sort, at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. The audience was thus predictably full of film buffs, Oscar-aspiring film directors, artists, people who "take film seriously." For the two-hour screening, most everyone was laughing out loud and talking back to the screen. It was a lively, animated viewing experience. Yet after the screening most people, the same people who were just laughing and engaged with the film, talking back to it, dismissed the film as silly, not serious, and "campy." It became clear that most of the audience was assuming that Biller's style of camp couldn't possibly do any serious work or be worthy of serious analysis. This notion—that Biller's

feminism, because it is campy, does not take feminism seriously or do serious feminist work—is precisely what I dispute in this chapter.

A quote on Biller's IMDb page explains her frustration with not being taken seriously and acknowledges how her "natural campiness" often gets in the way of audiences understanding her work. Biller explains,

> I'm less interested now in making the audience aware that they're watching a movie, but that's because I've been misunderstood a lot. I don't want it to be a joke. I'm very frustrated when people find my movies to be a joke, because of the artifice. They're real stories about real things. I'd like to take away that block. But I don't know if I can, due to my natural campiness and my personal tastes."[3]

Biller attributes her campiness to "personal tastes" and her natural inclination. In doing this, she presents a view of camp subjectivity as unavoidable and innate, invoking the sense of camp as a worldview, as a way of seeing and reading the world. Clearly, Biller's worldview is influenced by her identity as a mixed-race woman and her experiences with sexism and racism in both real life and watching movies, which she discusses in blog posts, interviews, and on Twitter. In her films, Biller blurs the lines between camp subject and camp object, camp spectatorship and camp production.

In this chapter I explore Biller's two feature films which she wrote, directed, edited, and for which she was the main production designer and costume designer. Biller typically stars as the main lead in her films, including her early short films and her first feature *Viva* (2007). Although Biller does not star in *The Love Witch* (2016), she still

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[3] "Anna Biller," *IMDb*, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0082366/bio; Greg Goodsell, "Viva Viva!," *Screem Magazine*, https://www.lifeofastar.com/reviews/Screem.html

maintains complete control over nearly every aspect of the filmmaking. *Viva* evokes the vibe of Classic Hollywood cinema and 1960s sexploitation films. Set in 1972 Los Angeles, it follows a curious and bored housewife who wants to be a model as she embarks on a journey of sexual liberation that makes her question what she really wants. Biller's second feature, *The Love Witch* (2016), is Biller's second and most recent feature film set in present day Northern California amid a backdrop of 1960s and 1970s inspired sets, costumes, and characters about a modern-day witch obsessed with finding true love whose man-catching strategy is twofold—accepting prescribed gender roles and giving men "what they want" (working within the patriarchy) and using witchcraft to lure and seduce men (working outside the patriarchy)—although this continues to backfire as her men keep dying.

My goal for this chapter is threefold: (1) to explore how Biller's films function as examples of feminist camp, (2) to consider how Biller uses camp to destabilize "feminist" from a feminist position and by doing so explores the tensions between feminist film theory and feminist camp, and (3) to bring Biller into academic conversations about feminist film and camp. So many articles and blogs about Biller as well as interviews are available online, yet feminist scholars have not yet included her work in the scholarly conversation. An exception to that is Elena Gorfinkel's *Camera Obscura* article on *Viva* in the context of the sexploitation film genre (a version of which is also included in the edited anthology *Peep Shows* on eroticism in cult films) and a subsequent brief mention of Biller in her book on the same topic.

I want to briefly return to the AFI screening of *The Love Witch*. The film was easily recognized as "campy." Because of this, most of the audience at the AFI screening

agreed that *The Love Witch* was not worthy of a serious discussion—"it's just camp!" In the Q & A that followed with the writer/director Anna Biller, she maintained a serious albeit occasionally playful demeanor as she spoke about the film seriously. The film was a serious exploration about how heterosexual women (and more specifically, heterosexual white women) are simultaneously trapped by and captivated with fairytales and promises of everlasting love, how women and men's relationships are inextricably intertwined with the patriarchy. She also spoke about her fondness for old movies—for the old technicolor films, the colors and the costumes and the sets. Biller also described herself as a feminist filmmaker. She spoke about the film as being intentionally feminist, as a feminist exploration of how women get caught up in the patriarchy and how, even when women try to play by the rules of patriarchy, it backfires and does not work in their favor. For most of the "serious filmmakers" in that room, though, it would seem that the feminist message of the film was lost in its campy style, for many later discussed the film only in relation to its lighting, the cinematography, and the impressive production design.

Many of the dismissive audience responses to the film referred to the "bad acting," "tackiness," "over-the-top set design," and "random" scenes (particularly the Victorian tea room scenes and the Renaissance Faire scenes, which I discuss later in this chapter). Those who responded favorably or "liked" the film said they could overlook the campiness to appreciate the film's themes because there is a deeper feminist meaning embedded in the film. I want to argue, however, that the film's campiness is not something to be overlooked or put up with, but rather an essential part of the film and its function as a feminist film. In other words, if Biller could recreate *The Love Witch* without the camp, it would not be a better film, as many people seemed to imply; rather,

without the camp, the film's feminist politics would not hold up and it would be an entirely different kind of film with an entirely different message.

Anna Biller's Feminist Agenda

Biller's films are feminist, according to her own definition for what constitutes a feminist film as well as the label that film critics put on her work. The label "feminist" is sometimes applied to films broadly, with films being called feminist when they are about a woman's experience, from a woman's point of view, exploring sexuality, or exploring a female gaze. Feminist film theorist Anneke Smelik suggests a more specific definition, describing the feminist film as "a film which represents sexual difference from a woman's point of view, displaying a critical awareness of the asymmetrical power relation between the sexes."[4] Smelick clarifies that her "open definition" of what constitutes a feminist film "implies that not every film made by a woman can be called feminist" while also allowing for some films by men to fall into the category.[5]

Although Smelick's definition of a feminist film is useful for thinking about the category "feminist film," it perhaps assumes a too-narrow definition of "feminist." While Biller's films are almost all about the asymmetrical relationship and power imbalance between women and men in patriarchal society, Smelick's definition implies that a feminist film focus on women's relationships with men, excluding films like Cheryl Dunye's (discussed in Chapter Two), decidedly feminist, that often focus on women's relationships with other women. Biller posted a tweet in honor of the woman's film in

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[4] Anneke Smelick, *And The Mirror Cracked*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998), 1.
[5] Ibid., 2.

July 2018, along with a GIF of Bette Davis smoking a cigarette next to co-star Gary Merrill in a scene from *All About Eve* (1950). Biller writes,

> Lately I'm finding that most people (even in the film industry) have never heard of the woman's picture in Hollywood, and think movies back then were "bad for women." How can this be, when the genre comprises some fo [sic] of the best cinema ever made?[6]

Of course, as Smelick notes, not all films by women, about women, or catering to women are feminist films. Mary Ann Doane's analysis of the "women's film" genre popularized during 1940s in the Classic Hollywood era finds that these films, while centering women, prioritizing a female subject/feminine spectator position, and concerned with anxieties about shifting gender roles, ultimately rendered women as masochistic subjects who desire but whose desires are denied, rejected, or punished.[7]

Her films have received many reviews from film critics, yet her work has received very little critical attention. The lack of attention reflects a long-going hesitation to take camp seriously, by both "serious filmmakers" and "serious academics." Moreover, Biller's unique perspective on feminism, in which she both embraces and "camps" (critiques) feminism, perhaps renders her films less likely to be embraced by feminists than, say, a Hollywood biopic on Ruth Bader Ginsberg or a blockbuster about Wonder Woman.

Surprisingly, feminist academic scholarship has yet to offer an in-depth analysis of *The Love Witch*. Various feminist blogs and entertainment blogs have published online

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[6] Anna Biller @missannabiller. Twitter, July 6, 2018, 10:46am. https://twitter.com/missannabiller/status/1015291002901237760?lang=en
[7] Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 1987.

articles, interviews with Biller, or film reviews about *The Love Witch*, but the film still begs to be considered in feminist academic conversations.[8] A couple of scholars have, however, written about Biller's first feature film *Viva* (2007), which is about a bored unfulfilled housewife in the early 1970s who ventures into the different worlds of the sexual revolution and explores her sexuality. Elena Gorfinkel's article in *Camera Obscura* analyzes *Viva* as "a historiographic reconsideration of the sexploitation form," and examines the ways in which Biller plays with history and historical representations to carve out a new feminist perspective and female gaze in an otherwise predominantly male genre (sexploitation).[9] Beth Johnson's essay in the edited anthology *Peep Shows: Cult Films and the Cine-Erotic*, she studies *VIVA* as a film that explores "identity as a historical transformation," by playing with the present and past and reappropriating the cinematic visual style of 1960s and 1970s cinema in service of feminist politics.[10]

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[8] John Patterson, "*The Love Witch* director Anna Biller: 'I'm in conversation with the pornography all around us,'" *The Guardian*, March 2, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/love-witch-director-anna-biller-conversation-pornography; Katie Rife, "Director Anna Biller on the radical pleasures and subversive politics of *The Love Witch*," *AV Club*, March 17, 2017, https://film.avclub.com/director-anna-biller-on-the-radical-pleasures-and-subve-1798259618; Marie Lodi, "Anna Biller, director of "The Love Witch," talks to us about the film's iconic makeup looks and collecting vintage fashion," *Hello Giggles*, March 17, 2017, https://hellogiggles.com/beauty/anna-biller-director-of-the-love-witch-talks-about-the-films-iconic-makeup-looks-and-collecting-vintage-fashion/; Colin McCormack, "Filmmaker Interview," *SAGindie*, November 11, 2016, https://www.sagindie.org/interviews/anna-biller-love-witch/; Ellen Freeman, "I'm a freak, I'm a witch…I'm just a female: An interview with *The Love Witch* filmmaker Anna Biller," *Lenny*, March 7, 2017, https://www.lennyletter.com/story/interview-the-love-witch-filmmaker-anna-biller.

[9] Elena Gorfinkel, "Dated Sexuality: Anna Biller's *VIVA* and the Retrospective Life of Sixties Sexploitation Cinema," *Camera Obscura* 26, no. 3 (2011): 95-135.

[10] Beth Johnson, "Semblance and the Sexual Revolution: A Critical Review of *VIVA*," in *Peep Shows: Cult Film and the Cine-Erotic*, ed. Xavier Mendik (Wallflower Press, 2012).

Biller's films blend elements from different schools of feminism. In her work she embraces the equality values of liberal feminists, radical feminists' desire to dismantle the patriarchy, and cultural feminists' celebration of the feminine, the female essence, and the differences between women and men. Her work is also sex-positive and queer, exploring women's sexuality, women's sexual desire, sexual liberation, and sexual subcultures. In an online blog post after *The Love Witch* was released, Biller calls out media and critics for so easily calling movies "feminist" based on minimal criteria, and argues that labeling so many movies "feminist" in fact loosens the grip of feminist politics. Biller writes,

> By using the word *feminism* so often and indiscriminately, we are erasing feminist discourse. The over-use of the word feminism has rendered it entirely meaningless as a serious political topic, making it easier and easier for everyone to think of it as just a trendy subject or a buzzword rather than the very fabric of women's lives. This is an effective way to kill a political movement, *and it's working*.[11]

Biller critiques scholars and film fans who celebrate films as "feminist" for simply showing strong and/or complicated women characters. Biller particularly takes issue with the popular assumption that contemporary films are necessarily feminist compared to earlier films because women have more rights in contemporary society than they did back then. She claims the term feminism has been so diluted such that any movie that simply depicts a woman character as human is to be counted as feminist by the mainstream and film critics. Biller insists, "to be feminist, a movie has to have the express purpose of

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[11] Anna Biller, "Let's Stop Calling Movies Feminist," Anna's Blog: Musings About Film and Culture. February 5, 2018 http://annabillersblog.blogspot.com/2018/02/lets-stop-calling-movies-feminist.html

educating its audience about social inequality between men and women (and, I would argue, not take pleasure in the voyeuristic degradation of destruction of women)."[12] Films with strong and/or complicated women characters are not inherently feminist, and Biller would contend that many of these films are in fact *not feminist*. Rather, Biller demands that a film actually engage directly with feminist politics and feminist issues. For her, a film starring a woman or about a "complex woman" is not enough to constitute a feminist film.

For a film to be considered feminist according to Biller's standards, it must, like *Viva* and *The Love Witch* advance a feminist politics and filter its content through a feminist lens. This is why Biller objects to calling films that show "strong women," but filtered through the male gaze or in service of a male-dominated master narrative, feminist films. Whether her films are set in the past or set in present-day but aesthetically and narratively invoke the past, Biller's work reflects a mission to rethink the past through a feminist lens. Furthermore, in *The Love Witch*, which is presumably set in present-day but aesthetically invokes the 1960s and 1970s, Biller invites viewers to reconsider feminist "solutions" to sexism and women's oppression.

The way Biller engages with the past in her films—narratively and aesthetically—invokes postmodernist parody. Indeed, many of her films, including *VIVA* and *The Love Witch*, parody early and Classic Hollywood (and in *VIVA*, the sexploitation film) through their play with genre conventions, aesthetics, tone, cinematography and editing, and the male gaze. Linda Hutcheon's innovative work on postmodernist parody pushes back

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[12] Ibid.

against many scholars of postmodernism who argue that parody is ahistorical, empty, kitschy, and apolitical.[13] Hutcheon argues that parody's political potential and ability to critically engage with history lies in its function as "a double process of installing and ironizing [through which] parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference."[14] Indeed, Biller's films simultaneously re-create Classic Hollywood while also ironizing it. Hutcheon notes that postmodern parody is a useful tool for feminist artists because it "point[s] to the history and historical power of those cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them."[15] Biller uses visuals, costumes, colors, and sets reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s, when the United States experienced a sexual revolution and women's liberation movement, to link feminism across time, to suggest that the changes incited by the sexual revolution may have actually further trapped women in the patriarchy rather than liberate them from it. In fact, Biller's work demonstrates that as feminism makes dents in the patriarchy, misogyny and sexism grow stronger. Feminism is always needed because there is no quick fix or solution to misogyny and sexism. This perspective is in stark contrast with post-feminist discourse that takes the position that feminism is over, done with, and made a significant impact but is no longer needed because things are better now.

Campy Visual Excess as "Aesthetic Arrest"

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[13] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989).
[14] Ibid., 89.
[15] Ibid., 98.

Anna Biller is a filmmaker who takes film and feminism seriously and yet her films are often not taken seriously because they are campy. In the Director's Statement on her website, Biller writes that she is "interested in trying to create a cinema based on visual pleasure for women."[16] In auteur fashion, she explains that she tries to maintain control over "everything that goes into the film frame," and tries to "create 'proper' art films masquerading as popular films." Biller views her aesthetics choices and visual style as directly linked to her feminist politics and the purpose behind her feminist filmmaking. She explains that even though she "quotes genres" and references other films in her own films, she is not using them as pastiche, "but to create a sense of aesthetic arrest to insert a female point of view." In this sense, her feminist filmmaking operationalizes what bell hooks refers to as 'the oppositional gaze," which involves the active looking back, critically analyzing, and call to action.[17]

Biller's aesthetic blends vibrant colors with showy costumes, and elaborate, theatrical-like sets to recreate the supersaturated look of old Hollywood technicolor movies, highlight the excessiveness of sexploitation film set pieces and costumes, and reimagine the romanticized notions of the Old West in Westerns. By creating an aesthetic that is "extra" and excessive and accentuates the visual style of old films, Biller pays homage to the old films and the strategies they used to captivate us while also offering a sharp critique of the ways in which they used these same strategies to relegate women as objects for male pleasure with few narrative stakes. In this chapter I explore Anna Biller as an independent camp filmmaker whose work is both feminist camp as well as a

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[16] See Anna's Biller's website, www.lifeofastar.com
[17] hooks, bell, "The Oppositional Gaze," 1992.

camping of feminism. Furthermore, I examine how Biller uses the tools of camp to undermine the male gaze and the spectatorship dynamics that defined Classic Hollywood (and arguably still most of Hollywood today). In doing this, Biller offers new pleasures for the feminist camp spectator that does not require a reading against the grain but instead reimagines and re-presents the tropes of Hollywood such that the spectator can identify with the character.

Biller's work has developed somewhat of a cult following the release of her two feature films. She puts on public screenings of her films around Los Angeles and other areas where fans gather and dress up as characters from her films and socialize in spaces decorated like sets from her films and with themed props and food. Biller uses camp for feminist filmmaking *because* she takes feminism seriously, albeit not always agreeing with it. Katrin Horn describes camp as "serious excess" and argues that the excessiveness reflects an understanding, not a dismissal, of the camp object. Horn refers to camp as a form of "in-group humor, capable of intervening in naturalized and naturalizing discourses of gender and sexuality, while granting access to otherwise oppressive systems of meaning—and pleasure-making."[18] Thus, Biller's films offer an example of in-group humor that plays with both patriarchal cinema and the feminist responses to it to cater to a feminist camp spectator and create a new kind of viewing pleasure through camp.

Movies are often associated with magic or considered to create a kind of "magic." bell hooks says that movies are about fantasy and imagination, not trying to be real, which is what gives them a kind of magic.[19] Hollywood is all about trying to create visual

[18] Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*, 2017.
[19] bell hooks, *Reel to Real*, 1996.

pleasures, the kind that Laura Mulvey and many feminists critique. The Classical Hollywood era mastered cinematic techniques like cinematography, lighting, and editing that created a very particular kind of magic that captivated audiences and let them escape into identifications and fantasies. The problem was that this magic often catered to the male spectator and rendered women as passive objects on screen without narrative agency.

Biller manages to use the same cinematic techniques as Classical Hollywood but for a different purpose. She captivates audiences to redirect their point view. The extensive style in her films captures the viewer's attention. Viewers are willing to temporarily suspend critique of the film and continue to watch it because it looks familiar, it is "sexy," it looks like old movies we have seen before. And this is the point. Biller explains,

> "The style *is* the substance. Content is very important in movies, and I think that the style directly informs the content. The style of *The Love Witch* is very much part of what I'm trying to say with the movie and the character. The character is a witch. She makes magic. And I think cinema is a type of magic. I wanted not only for the character, Elaine, to case the spells, but I [also] wanted the movie to cast spells over the audience in terms of cinematic techniques. The lighting technique, the gauze over the lenses, the meticulous way that the color and sets are designed—it's all very deliberate to create a type of hypnosis, or trance, over the audience."[20]

In linking style to substance, Biller reflects the meaning behind her camp. Indeed, camp is a reflection not of ignorance or dismissal but of a thorough understanding of the camp object. When she associates the magic of witchcraft (a "feminine magic" that is also a

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[20] Oakley Anderson-Moore, "The Love Witch: If You Aren't Using Style As Substance, You're Doing It Wrong," No Film School, November 16, 2016, https://nofilmschool.com/2016/11/the-love-witch-anna-biller-interview

"feminist magic") to the magic of cinema (a magic associated with the active man and passive woman), she reappropriates cinema for women and creates space for a feminist agency.

Biller critically engages with other texts, particularly Classic Hollywood cinema in a way that camps the conventional tropes, plays with the traditional gaze structures, and reappropriates classic movie lines. Indeed, scholarship on camp has often pointed out that intertextuality, the reference to and engagement with other texts, images, and icons, is a common strategy seen in camp texts.[21] Indeed, camp texts are constantly in conversation with other texts. As a form of resistance, camp is inherently talking back to something or someone.[22] In her discussion of Lady Gaga as camp, Katrin Horn argues that "Lady Gaga's strategy of relying on intertextuality, not only to refer to camp texts of a different era, but also to update them and produce a camp text with critical and affective value for contemporary audiences."[23]

During a sex party scene in *Viva*, Biller makes a reference to Mae West (a feminist camp icon) and calls out the guy who "doesn't get it." A woman standing between two men tells one of them, "Oh Murray, peel me a grape!" When one of the guys replies, "Who do you think you are, Garbo?" leaving the other guy (our camp subject) to call him out, "That's Mae West, you ass!" The line is a play on Mae West's film *I'm No Angel*, featuring burlesque released just before the strict enforcement of the

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[21] Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*, 2017; Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996; Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 2008. See Horn's work (2017) on Lady Gaga, Robertson's work on Madonna, and Shugart and Waggoner's work on Gwen Stefani.
[22] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996.
[23] Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*, 230.

Hays Production Code a year later.[24] Furthermore, this Mae West reference offers a deeper racial implication and critique which I discuss later in this chapter.

On Anna Biller's IMDb page, the calling card/resume for the entertainment industry, it notes that she "is known for her lavish use of color and her feminist revisions of old Hollywood genre movies."[25] Indeed, Biller's feminist filmmaking is inextricably tied to her visual style. A.O. Scott describes *The Love Witch* as "a study in the color of red," with red appearing all throughout the film as a bright red convertible, red lipstick, red fingernails, red wine, red blood.[26] Indeed, the color red represents women's sexual desire and romantic fantasy, as well as the perceived or actual threat of women's sexuality and pursuit of pleasure.

Her films stand out from other campy films in that she takes her characters seriously. In an interview with *AV Club*, Biller says she gets reviews all the time that try to diminish her work by comparing it to cheap B-movies and exploitation films. One reviewer, she says, loved *The Love Witch* and suggested it be paired as a double feature with Jesús Franco's *Vampyros Lesbos*, a vampire lesbian exploitation film from 1971, which frustrated Biller. She explains,

> There's an insensitivity to that comparison that becomes harrowing for me after a while. I mean, I might be taking all of this too seriously, but you have to understand this has been going on for almost 10 years. It was only

[24] In *I'm No Angel* (1933) Mae West's line is "Oh, Beulah, peel me a grape!" (Beulah being her African American maid)
[25] See Anna Biller's IMDb page, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0082366/
[26] A.O. Scott, "Review: *The Love Witch*, Hell-Bent on Capturing Your Heart," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/movies/review-the-love-witch.html

> after three or four years of these reactions that I started to stand up for myself and explain where I'm really coming from.[27]

Biller's work has also been compared to the films by Quentin Tarantino, another auteur. Both Biller and Tarantino directly or indirectly reference classic films in their own work, produce very stylized films, explore sexuality and violence in their work, and play with different time periods. Furthermore, both Biller and Tarantino use camp to draw attention to and sometimes challenge genre conventions. On the cover of the DVD for Biller's first feature *Viva*, a quote from *Entertainment Weekly* describes the film as "Fetishistically spot-on…hilarious…could just about be the third featurette in [Tarantino's] *Grindhouse*…A Truly Sexy Movie."

Despite comparisons to Tarantino, I would argue that Biller's use of camp and reference to classic films in her work is different than Tarantino's because it is distinctly feminist. Tarantino uses camp to entertain and shock, he pays homage to other films to solidify his own place among the famous auteurs. Biller, on the other hand, uses camp to service her feminist politics, and recreates or reimagines classic movie scenes in order to critique them, adding her feminist perspective to film history.

The 1960s also saw significant changes in Hollywood, with the replacement of The Hays Code, Hollywood's version of censorship, with the MPAA rating system, thus opening up more possibilities for representations of women, sex, as well as violence. Furthermore, the 1960s signaled significant cultural and political shifts in the United States, including the Vietnam War, sexual revolution, women's liberation movement, gay

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[27] Katie Rife, "Director Anna Biller on the Radical Pleasures and Subversive Politics of *The Love Witch*," 2017.

rights movement, and civil rights movement. Biller invokes the 1960s and 1970s in both her feature films, exploring contemporary sexual politics by juxtaposing them with the sexual politics of that era. Her camp style also reflects the changes Robertson mentions, as Biller's camp is political, exaggerating norms, flipping the script, and accentuating the tropes in order to highlight the ironies and constructed nature of these elements in film and culture we take for granted (like the fairytale romance "master narrative," or the male gaze and objectification of the female body).

Biller's Retro-Feminist Camp

In real life, feminist filmmaker Anna Biller embodies a retro-feminist-chic persona that reflects a love for Hollywood cinema, a politicized feminist agenda, and a biting critique of both. I use the phrase "retro-feminist" to refer to her work because her feminism is a conversation between the present and the past, often blurring the two and using one to invoke the other. Biller self-identifies as a feminist and has spoken about being committed to making feminist films that explore women's sexuality. On the website for her production company, Anna Biller Productions, she says she makes "fabulous films about men, women, and love."[28] Biller's filmography includes two feature films (*Viva* and *The Love Witch*,) as well as four short films. She has noted in interviews that her background in art and theatre has heavily influenced her film style and visual approach to storytelling.

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[28] Anna Biller Productions. www.lifeofastar.com

Biller's characters embody what Shugart and Waggoner describe as a vintage camp style.[29] In their discussion of Gwen Stefani as a camp performer, Shugart and Waggoner describe her camp as modeled on vintage sex symbols, conveying a bold and unrepentant sexuality.[30] They point out that Stefani derails from the sex symbol trope by making frequent and sustained direct eye contact with the camera and the audience. This, they explain deviates from the trope of the sex symbol who is supposed to be a passive object of the male gaze and thus often looks away instead of making direct eye contact in order to appear submissive, vulnerable, and accessible. Biller manages to recreate the vintage sex symbol's submissiveness while also adding the direct confrontation and "returned gaze" that Shugart and Waggoner describe with Stefani.

Biller exudes a vintage femininity in her real life persona which transfers over to the characters in her films. Similar to how pop culture icons like Madonna, Gwen Stefani, Christina Aguilera will channel vintage sex symbols like Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot from the early-mid 20th century, Biller presents herself online and presents her characters (played by herself and others) in ways that evoke a vintage femininity, with clothing and make-up and hair emulating earlier eras. Biller's website, titled "Life of a Star," features two examples of vintage camp that reflect a play with the active/passive sex symbol described above. The image on the home page is a colorful drawing for the poster of *The Love Witch*. The picture of Elaine, the main character and witch in the film reflects the returned gaze, the direct eye contact with the viewer. Elaine's hands, covered in blood above the tagline "She Loved Men…To Death" show

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[29] Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 2007.
[30] Ibid., 124.

not only the campy excessive and “extra”-ness but also establishes the active vintage sex symbol as a threat. Here, Elaine looks like a 1960s sex symbol but her stare is fixed on us, her hands are bloody, and the warning that she is suffocating is right there. Contrast that with the tab on the same website for Anna Biller’s Bio, Director’s Statement, and a Q & A where we see a still photograph of Biller, in costume and presumably in character for the film *Viva* where she plays the title role of Viva/Barbi Smith. In the photo, Biller is dressed in a retro 1960s minidress, sitting with her knees bent, and hunched over provocatively posing one shoulder in front of the other, twisting her body, while she purses her bright orange lips and looks off screen. Although Biller models a seductive pose, it is also one that is physically vulnerable (and probably uncomfortable) and her lack of eye contact reflects a submissiveness akin to the vintage sex symbols that Shugart and Waggoner describe.

The beforementioned opening scene in *The Love Witch* reimagines the driving and cop scene from *Psycho* from a feminist perspective. The various striptease scenes where Elaine seduces the men are reminiscent of the “Put on the Blame on Mame” striptease number performed by Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (1946). The scene where Trish makes herself over in the likeness of Elaine in Elaine’s bedroom (this is just before Trish finds out that Elaine “killed” Trish’s husband Richard) is a sort of feminist reimagining of the makeover scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) when Scottie aggressively pressures Judy to make herself over in the likeness of Madeleine, Scottie’s ideal fantasy of a woman.

In the scene with Trish alone in Elaine’s bedroom, in front of all of Elaine’s accessories and mirror, Trish is a feminist making herself over into the post-feminist

fantasy image that Elaine projects to men. In this moment the male fantasy is deconstructed, piece-by-piece, and is revealed to be "fake," a sort of performative grotesque mask. Here, Biller engages with classic Hollywood (invoking *Vertigo*) to show that the same cinematic tools used to marginalize and objectify and oppress women in films can be reappropriated in service of a feminist politics and female gaze. With this, Biller diverts from Laura Mulvey's conclusion in her 1975 canonical feminist film theory essay that essentially insists that the master's tools, Classic Hollywood film techniques, cannot dismantle the master's house, Classic Hollywood cinema.

Elena Gorfinkel describes Biller's reimagination of the past in her films as a sort of historiography that posits the female spectator as a cinephile, commenting on women's representation in the past as a woman in the present.[31] As mentioned above, with the exception of her most recent feature film, *The Love Witch* (2016), Biller plays the main character in her early short films and feature *Viva* (2007). In this sense, her work is part of a tradition in feminist, and often lesbian feminist or queer feminist, filmmaking along the lines of the work of Cheryl Dunye, Barbara Hammer, Sadie Benning, Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner, who insert themselves into their own films and engage with and put into practice their oppositional gaze. Biller's performance as the main character in her film *VIVA* is part of feminist and queer feminist cinema's oppositional gaze in practice, looking back and talking back to the dominant gaze and insisting on their own visibility. Although Biller does not star or appear in *The Love Witch*, her "voice" is omnipresent throughout the film as she effectively re-imagines classic film moments and genre

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[31] Elena Gorfinkel, "Dated Sexuality," 2011.

conventions with a feminist revisionist lens. Her control over every frame and every cut is clear, as she uses production design, shot composition, and editing to impose her authority on the film. In this way, we don't so much experience the story with Elaine the protagonist, but rather with Anna Biller the feminist, who chooses when we are allowed to enter into Elaine's fantasy, when we're allowed to see her from the men's perspectives, and when we're given visual clues via cutaways and inserts that supplement the narrative.

Images of women are often presented as a dichotomy where they are defined by their sexuality. Early feminist film scholars tended to reduce images of women as "negative" or "positive," often pushing a type of respectability politics even if not referring to it as such. Camp studies tends to look at images of women in the form of icons or stars in popular culture and how push expectations of women and norms around femininity and play with notions of "good" and "bad" femininity.

We see the dichotomy played out in *Viva* with the character Barbi Smith and "Viva," (both are played by Biller). Viva is the alter ego which Barbi adopts when she embarks on her journey of sexual liberation. In the character Barbi/Viva, Biller embodies the duality of the virgin/whore dichotomy. Just her name alone, "Barbi Smith," evokes both an ordinariness (the "everywoman") and a "classic" femininity. Before we even meet Barbi, Biller paints the world as ordinary when she opens the film with birdseye shots of suburban Los Angeles while telling us via voiceover: "This is the story about a housewife during the sexual revolution. The time is 1972. The place is Los Angeles. And the people? Ordinary." Biller's choice of words in the voiceover—"this is *the* story"—as opposed to *a* story signals that this narrative is about more than just one woman; its

relevance is wider-reaching and about how women experience sexism and sexuality in a patriarchal society.

Anna Biller directly addresses sexism on screen but the ways in which she addresses race and racism are more nuanced, seemingly skirting around the issues of racial and ethnic difference in Hollywood. In some ways, this actually aligns Biller with early feminist film theory, which tended to focus on and privilege an analysis of sexual difference at the expense of race and other dimensions of difference. In other words, Biller's films, like early feminist film theory, are very white and do not deal directly with Classic Hollywood's racism. In doing the work of feminist film theory by deconstructing and subverting the male gaze, Biller's films appear to reconstruct and uphold the same (color-)blindspots that constrained early arguments about the male gaze.

This oversight in Biller's films reflects some of the problems that Linda Hutcheon and Pamela Robertson point out with postmodern parody (Hutcheon) and feminist camp (Robertson): its critique inevitably elicits the original thing that it is critiquing. Hutcheon and Robertson both note that parody's subversiveness is paired, to a degree, with complicity.[32] Even as camp destabilizes gender and other "truths," it inevitably always ends up engaging with that which it is trying to destabilize. In Biller's case, this is Classic Hollywood's glamour system and racism. Camp, as subversive as it may be, is also complicitous, to an extent, in the visibility of mainstream norms and stereotypes. By shying away from direct engagement with race and ethnicity, Biller misses out on the opportunity to use camp to expose white privilege, talk back to white feminism, and

[32] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1989; Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996.

explore how patriarchy works in conjunction with other systems of oppression and power.

Although I have claimed that Anna Biller's films are limited in their engagement with race, whiteness, and racism, I do want to point out the ways in which she does engage with these issues. In doing this, I want to suggest that a closer look at race in her films, in combination with statements she has made outside of her films (namely on her Twitter account and on her blog), reveals that she might actually be trying to engage more critically with race and ethnicity than it otherwise seems based on the films themselves. In one thread Biller writes,

> Just thinking about how when I made VIVA and A VISIT FROM THE INCUBUS not one single critic ever talked about the act of placing myself (a mixed-race person) within white suburbia and The Old West respectively and what that might have meant for the stories being told.
>
> I didn't talk about it [sic] race [in] interviews after awhile because it was clear that no one wanted to hear it.
>
> Anyway the great thing about making movies outside of a studio is that you can make things just sort of weird and vague and under the surface and get away with it.
>
> So how would VIVA have been different if Barbie Smith had been portrayed by a white blonde woman? Someone teaching a class on race and representation could ask the students that question.
>
> The best audience I ever had for VIVA was a nearly all black audience in Philadelphia. The way they were laughing until they cried, and from their comments afterwards, it was clear that it was a huge relief for them to see white suburbia skewered like that.
>
> I did have fun naming my characters "Barbie Smith" and "Lucy McGee."
>
> "Art reflects life, and as long as white people are terrified of acknowledging racial inequalities, white movie characters will be,

too."-Zoé Samudzi[33]

Biller's Twitter account reveals the ways in which she both calls out racism in film and Hollywood history, and addresses the issue of race in her work. For example, she has explained that her casting choices—namely casting herself, a mixed-race woman, as the lead in her films *A Visit From The Incubus* (2001, short), which is set in the Old West, and *VIVA* (2007), which is set in 1970s (white) suburbia. In her Twitter posts, Biller explains how she tried to be subversive with regard to race in her two films.

In another Twitter post (which I discuss more later), Biller notes that moviegoers for *VIVA* often noticed the Playboy references but did not notice that she was invoking Playboy to critique white suburban culture. In assessing her viewers' "failed" interpretations (which also might speak to the "failures" or limitations of camp), Biller alludes to the ways in which camp audiences, and even feminist camp audiences may "get" some of the text while missing other parts. Although camp spectators are often part of marginalized groups and subcultures that are outside of the mainstream, this does not mean that they are camp readers when it comes to all things. Scholars emphasize camp as a *relationship* between people and texts. Esther Newton explains, "Camp is not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a relationship between things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality."[34] Newton's description speaks more specifically to gay male camp, but still applies here. Some of Biller's viewers might be attuned to gender issues, be "in the know" about patriarchy, and "get" the films' subversion of the male gaze but also, at the same time, "not get" the racial subtext and have it go over their heads. The question I

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33 Anna Biller @missannabiller, Twitter, June 8, 2020, https://twitter.com/missannabiller
34 Esther Newton, "Role Models," 1993.

want to pose here, although I am unequipped to answer it, is why Biller, who is unrestricted by the capitalist needs of the studio system and Hollywood pressures to appeal to a mainstream audience, would make her critique of patriarchy and sexism so direct but use a more subtle and nuanced approach when it comes to racism and white privilege.

The "magic" and glamour (aesthetics) of Hollywood cinema that Biller tries to capture (and camp) in her films are rooted in racist, white supremacist ideologies. Part of this magic involves lighting. Indeed, how characters are lit tells us who is important, who is beautiful, and who is desirable. So when Biller and her Director of Photography recreate the kind of Hollywood lighting that makes women "glow" on screen and makes them "glamourous," which works in conjunction with make-up, hair, and costume, they are also recreating the conditions that solidified whiteness as desirable and glamourous and left women of color out (it either depicted women of color as asexual, hypersexual and thus too sexual to be "glamourous" like the white female stars, or it just left them out altogether). Richard Dyer notes that early Hollywood stars like Lillian Gish were *white* stars, whose stardom was largely due to their whiteness, the particular kind of whiteness that they conveyed, which was largely crafted by the film's lighting.[35] Furthermore, Dyer exposes the blindspots in the ways people (mainly white people) have discussed, learned, and practiced lighting for film and photography. For example, he notes that many people still believe that the technologies of photography and film capture images of people with lighter skin tones better than those with darker skin tones. Even today many film students

[35] Richard Dyer, *White* (Routledge, 1997).

do not learn how to light for non-white skin and/or making casting choices based on what they perceive as lighting challenges, or completely mis-light non-white actors. They take it as fact that it is just easier to light white people. That, of course, is not true but instead the result of technologies and teaching methods developed by white people. Indeed, Dyer points out that the apparatuses used in photography and film were intentionally created by (white) people in a way that lit lighter skin tones more clearly. Thus, it is not by chance nor necessity that Hollywood produced glamourous *white* movie stars; the early and classic Hollywood glamour system (and the basis for how the United States and the world see beauty and glamour) relies on two of the most powerful and overlooked tools of white supremacy—the light and the camera.

Biller's subtle interventions into the white supremacist glamour structure that fuels Hollywood's racist iconography and marginalizes women of color have much less bite than her feminist critique of Hollywood's sexism. In a similar vein, film critics rarely ever mention the issue of race in her films or racism pertaining to the Classic Hollywood conventions which she camps. Biller has spoken about how racism, when presented ironically in films, ends up perpetuating it rather than calling it out. She points out that ironic racism, when done by white filmmakers and for a mainstream (white) audience, functions as an "in-joke" for white people that makes racism funny at the expense of people of color in the film and in the audience. In several twitter posts she argues,

> Racism only works as irony if the protagonist (and ideally the filmmakers also) are non-white.
>
> Unaddressed racism does not make a film shocking. It does not make a character cool or cutting edge. The mistake is in assuming that your audience is in on the "joke." Because if your audience is mainly white it's an in-joke that leaves POC out.

> Someday I'm going to write an essay called "Racism Disguised as Irony or Commentary in Independent American Cinema from 1990 to the Present."
>
> What's really tone-deaf is when racism is included in a film to get a laugh. Racism is a serious subject and you can be sure that non-white viewers are not laughing.[36]

As mentioned earlier, Biller makes subtle nods to race in her work. Biller plays the lead and is the only person of color to appear on screen in her short film, "A Visit From The Incubus" (2001). The film is set in the Old West and tells the story of Lucy (played by Biller) who is harassed and raped by the Incubus, a mythical male creature who assaults sleeping women in the middle of the night, and deals with the aftermath by becoming a showgirl at the local saloon. Biller's casting choice of herself, a mixed-race Asian/White woman, in the Old West, de-centers the whiteness of the Western genre and the damsel in distress, even while still creating an Old West that is otherwise entirely white. In *VIVA*, Biller similarly casts herself as the lead and decenters whiteness in the "bored suburban housewife" trope, centering a mixed-race woman in a story about the sexual revolution and 1970s feminism. Although Biller positions herself as the lead in these typically white spaces, the gesture carries little weight and the critique is limited since her character is never identified as mixed-race in the film, passes in some spaces as white, and race is never addressed or played with in the film. Even as the film offers numerous close-ups and long takes focused on Biller's face, her mixed-race identity is never explicit and when she doesn't pass for white she comes off as more racially ambiguous. There is even

[36] Anna Biller @missannabiller, Twitter post, February 20, 2019, https://twitter.com/missannabiller

an inside joke in the film where VIVA tells the character Clyde an elaborate (fabricated) backstory about her Italian heritage and growing up in Tuscany and living with nuns, suggesting that within the film her character is read as "exotic" but not necessarily not-white.

Other than Biller, only two speaking characters in VIVA are people of color: Agnes, a black woman who is one of Viva's love interests, and a woman at the final sex party. The partygoer is played by Biller's Japanese mother, Sumiko Biller, and is listed as "Japanese Mae West" in the credits. Agnes's minor role as a love interest and sexual partner for Viva both perpetuates and pushes back against the stereotypes of hypersexual black women and predatory lesbians. Agnes plays a predatory lesbian who is hypersexual. She first meets Viva at a pool party in a hot tub while Viva is being bombarded by predatory men. After an exchange of glances that, following cinematic conventions, suggest sexual desire, Agnes lures Viva into the hot tub. Like the predatory older secretary at the modelling agency who makes a pass at Barbi, Agnes is another woman in the film who wants Barbi/Viva's body. Indeed, Biller is making a point that women can objectify other women just like men. While Agnes initially fits the stereotype of the predatory lesbian and the hypersexual black woman, later in the film she snaps back at Clyde, who insists he show him her ass. In the scene, Clyde shows Viva one of his unfinished sculptures. It is a sculpture of a butt and we soon learn it is Agnes's. Clyde calls Agnes over, wanting to see her ass, and Agnes walks over in a sheer gown and tells him that she's sick of showing him her ass, and that he needs to finish the sculpture by memory. She then turns away from Clyde to join Viva and brings her outside to have sex. While the film makes Agnes's character out to be predatory, she also hijacks Clyde's

male gaze, both in his attempt to seduce Viva and in his attempt to see Agnes's naked body. The irony here is that Agnes's gown is already sheer (Clyde can already see her ass), and, despite what Clyde believes, Viva isn't trying to be a "good girl" by refusing to sleep with him, she would just rather flirt with Agnes. Here, Clyde's character stands in for those who would challenge affirmative consent, who believe that if anyone has access to a woman's body, then he should too.

The small cameo by Biller's mother as "Japanese Mae West" surrounded by gay white men presents an ironic reading of Mae West, who is typically featured in her films surrounded by black female maids. In the original line, Mae West declares, "Oh Beulah, peel me a grape!" Here, Japanese Mae West is surrounded by two gay men, one of whom calls out the other for failing to "get" the reference (thus implying he is a "bad gay" or "bad camp subject"). Feminist scholars such as Pamela Robertson and Kristen Hatch discuss how Mae West's campiness is linked to her proximity to blackness (black women) and gay men.[37] West appropriates black culture and gay male culture in her performance of excessive femininity and sexual promiscuity. The Japanese Mae West, however, camps Mae West, who is herself a camp icon. The two gay men reveal how camp can be easily misread and misappropriated. The gay men represent two kinds of camp spectators—one who "gets it" and is "in the know" and another who is "in the know" but misreads it.

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[37] Pamela Robertson, "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity,' and the Discourse of Camp," in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, eds. Jenkins, McPherson, Shattuc (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 287-299; Kristen Hatch, "Mae West: The Constant Sinner," in *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy*, eds. Mizejewski and Sturtevant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017): 86-108.

The scene with Japanese Mae West takes place during a larger sequence at a sex party. Notably, this is the moment in the film where we see the most people of color, albeit most have no speaking role. Viva dances in the middle of the party in a sea of racial Otherness, wearing an elaborate gold goddess costume while she sings and dances. She is surrounded by black women dressed in African-themed costumes and dancing to drums and men of color wearing tribal-themed costumes. The rest of the room is full of white men and white women getting it on (with the exception of Agnes, who is also there and dressed in a gold shimmery bikini and starring with desire at Viva). All the men in the room look at Viva, even as they are kissing or flirting with other women. Viva is the center of attention. Her exotic costume, provocative song lyrics, and proximity to exoticized racial Others amplifies her seduction and desirability.[38] The chorus to Viva's song is an invitation and a challenge and reads like an excerpt from a steamy romance novel:

> Do with me what you will
> Do it all
> I can't stop myself from throbbing
> Like a tender shoot
> Like a rosebud unfolding
> Like a Venus flytrap of love
> Holding you
> Also throbbing
> In my thrall

Interestingly, the line "Do with me what you will" sounds strikingly similar to camp icon Lady Gaga's 2014 song "Do What U Want," which originally featured R. Kelly and

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[38] Robertson discusses how Mae West's proximity to black women and gay men (racial and sexual Others) amplifies her camp performance and are key to her transgressive image.

received substantial backlash, particularly after R. Kelly's arrest on sexual assault and other related charges, and was linked to rape culture (the song has since been re-recorded as a duet between Lady Gaga and Christina Aguilera). Viva's performance in the film comes right after Clyde roofied her drink (at the suggestion and encouragement of Mrs. James, the Madam at the brothel for which Viva works) and before Clyde rapes her in a bedroom at the party.

The subsequent rape is not the typical rape scene. Instead, it is quite campy. Biller's employs a feminist gaze to disrupt the spectacle of rape and present rape as an out of body experience, quite literally, as the rape briefly takes us away from live action and into animation. After Viva finishes the song, Clyde carries her limp body over to another room to a bed adorned with cheetah print pillows. Several uneaten red apples sit on the nightstand. The camera racks focus between the apples and Viva's face while she moans, her body and face emotionless. Suddenly, a shot of Viva staring at the apples turns into a trippy colorful animated cartoon. The apples have teeth! One of the apples bites and eats the two other apples, burping after the final bite. The animation shifts from apples to colorful flowers (a campy symbol of Viva's vagina) that rotate in circles on the screen. We return to the live action, with only Clyde's arm and Viva's face in view. Viva still has the same emotionless empty expression on her face. This live action shot is invaded by the animated as animated blood drops drip down from the top of the screen. The screen cuts to black and next we see Viva wake up in the same bed next to Clyde, two women, and another man (holding an apple) in the bed, sleeping. Viva's face is no longer emotionless but disgusted. This is Viva's low point for the film. Viva cannot sleep, has trouble remembering that night. She has nightmares and flashbacks about what

happened. She takes pills, sulks around the house looking at pictures of her husband Rick, and ultimately decides to stop working with the brothel. As she tells Sheila, she (Barbi/Viva) became “Totally a woman…and I liked it. But it was too much.” With this line, Biller suggests that Barbi identified too much with femininity, the femininity was too excessive. Barbi was “too close” to be “protected” by the masquerade, which made her femininity dangerous (to herself). Of course the irony is that Clyde drugged her, and that it’s not actually her femininity that is dangerous, but the men who use it as an excuse to harass and sexually assault her.

Spectacle and the Feminist Camp Gaze

Classic Hollywood cinema constructs visual pleasure for the male spectator by turning women’s bodies into a spectacle, an object of desire that caters to voyeuristic and fetishistic fantasies. In the 1930s and 1940s, Busby Berkeley masterfully manipulated the camera and used cinematic techniques to highlight women’s bodies in massive musical numbers that he choreographed. Robertson reads Berkeley’s films, particularly *Gold Diggers of 1933*, as examples of camp.[39] Moreover, she explains that Berkeley’s emphasis on the female form and women in large groups in his musical numbers creates a stage spectacle that is uniquely cinematic and only available to a film audience, created through camera shots and angles and editing techniques that emphasize the women as objects. The camp effect of Berkeley’s musical films, Robertson contends, is dependent on the viewer recognizing the disconnect between the musical numbers and the narrative.

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[39] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996.

Biller's films regularly feature performances, often with singing and dancing by the main characters. Rather than being disconnected to the narrative, they advance it. For example, in *Viva*, Barbi (as Viva) is dressed in an elaborate gold costume at a sex party where she sings a song with the lyrics "Do with me what you want." The performance ends up making all the men in the room ravenous. This is supposed to be a moment of liberation for Viva, a source of pleasure for herself, but it is hijacked by men who crowd around her, wanting a piece of her, to the point where this actually makes Viva sick and she gets carried away (by Clyde, who doesn't want to help her so much as keep her for himself).

The film also shows the ways in which women look at other women. Barbi/Viva functions not only as a spectacle but also as a spectator in the film, constantly looking at images of women in magazines and artwork. The film blurs the lines between feminist camp subject and feminist camp object when Barbi herself into a version of what she sees and becomes her persona "Viva." These moments in the film are not so much about sexual desire but a desire to be like the other women. Several times throughout the film we see Barbi reading *Viva* magazine, the woman's equivalent to *Playboy* at the time. We also know that she reads *Playboy* because she and Sheila talk about it all the time. When Barbi and Sheila look through *Playboy* magazine together, they comment on the women in the photos and agree that the women are pretty but "too skinny." Sheila suggests they compare themselves to the girls so she and Barbi strip down to their underwear. Meanwhile, Sheila's husband, a photographer, is watching them as they laugh and pose seductively and he takes photos. This is a moment where the lines between camp object and camp subject are blurred. Barbi and Sheila are reading the Playboy images as over

the top, excessively feminine, not like real women. Then they start to imitate the Playboy women, performing the excessive femininity.

The stripteases in *The Love Witch* are examples of the ways in which Biller hijacks the male gaze and turns the spectacle of woman into a camp object. As Shugart and Waggoner explain, the spectacle is "where the substance of camp is contained—the aesthetic dimension characterized by over-the-top, sensational, and particularly image-driven displays or events—that defines camp."[40] In the first striptease seduction scene in *The Love Witch*, for example, Elaine is trying to seduce Wayne, her new love interest. They are in his cabin in the woods, eating a dinner that Elaine prepared. Elaine stands up and starts to sway her body and take off clothes. Wayne is excited, but starts to experience the effects of a hallucinogen that Elaine had given him in a drink earlier (she put a spell on him). Suddenly, as Elaine is stripping and dancing, staring intensely at Wayne, he starts to hallucinate and see red, green, and blue stripes. The spectacle of Elaine is blurred by the stripes of colors. As she takes off more clothes, Wayne gets ravenous, but is temporarily blinded by the rainbow lining inside Elaine's coat jacket. The visual pleasure expected from Elaine as spectacle is interrupted by the excessive light and bright colors. Moreover, Elaine becomes a camp object as she takes herself and the striptease too seriously, performing an excessive femininity while she remains emotionless. The irony here is that Elaine strips for Wayne to "give him what he wants" so she can get what she wants—a stereotypical strong, macho manly man. However, what

[40] Other camp scholars, as noted in Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 2008, also emphasize the relationship between spectacle and/as camp. See Babuscio, Booth, Case, Cleto, Core, and Ross in *Camp*, ed. Fabio Cleto, 1999; Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996; Sontag, *Notes on Camp,* 1964.

she ends up getting in return, after she and Wayne have sex, is the opposite. Flipping the script on stereotypes about women being emotional and clingy after sex, Wayne becomes a hysterical wreck the next morning and is literally lovesick. In a similar scene later in the film, Elaine lures Richard (Trish's husband) to her apartment and seduces him. She dances seductively in front of him, he starts to drool and demands, "Who are you?!" Elaine replies seductively, "I'm the love witch. I'm your ultimate fantasy." Biller plays with the spectacle of the striptease, turning it into a site that disempowers men and turns Elaine into an ironic fantasy.

Biller plays with spectacle and emphasizes the irony of the striptease in another scene where Elaine is at a burlesque club talking to other witches while a woman performs on stage. Elaine is meeting with Gahan, a male witch who likes to mansplain, and Barbara, a female witch who helped mentor Elaine. The three of them sit at a table discussing witchcraft. They are soon joined by two women, probably late teens, who are identical twins with long blonde hair but look more creepy than sexy. Gahan is mansplaining about how dancing is a powerful thing for women and girls, pointing out that the woman dancing on stage is powerful, that men would do anything for her. Gahan's statement is ironic, though, since this "power" just feeds more into the patriarchy, where a woman's "power" is tied to the extent to which she will turn herself into an object. Elaine listens intently as Gahan and Barbara dive into a three-minute lecture while we see the burlesque dancer strip in the background as men go wild in the crowd over her. I include the dialogue from the film because it alludes to the film's feminist agenda and also how the film turns feminists into camp objects. With moments like this in the film, Biller encourages a feminist camp spectatorship by juxtaposing

“feminist ideas” with the ironic and excessive visual manifestations of those ideas-in-practice.

GAHAN

All witches need to figure out where their power lies. And we feel that a woman’s greatest power lies in her sexuality. We don’t view this power as Satanic or anti-feminist, but as a celebration of woman as a natural creature. An earthly body, a spiritual essence, and a womb.

BARBARA

The whole history of witchcraft is interwoven with the fear of female sexuality. They burned us at the stake because they feared the erotic feelings we elicited in them. Later, they used marriage to hold us in bondage and made us into servants, whores, and fantasy dolls, never asking us what we wanted.

GAHAN

They teach us that a normative human being is a hyper-rationalist stoic male and that women’s emotions and intuitions are illnesses that need to be cured. We believe that men and women are different and that true equality lies in that difference.

BARBARA

We strive for a male/female polarity and to remain our primal power as goddesses. We need to teach men how to love us using ways they can understand.

GAHAN

So goddesses, use perfume, wear high heels and make-up, learn to dress your hair in attractive ways, display flesh artfully and know what to conceal. Be a mother and a lover. Stand your ground, but always let the man feel like a man.

BARBARA

Use sex magic to destroy his fear of you and to open his heart to the floodgates of love. Only then will he begin to see you as a human being with all of your inner beauty. Then, when his heart is open to love, you may do with him what you will.

By the end of their lecture, the burlesque dancer is partly nude, having removed her dress and bra. Gahan and Barbara's teachings emphasize women needing to work within the system (patriarchy) to be find love and fulfillment. Note that Gahan's statements differ slightly from Barbara's in that his priority is women doing things to please men and make themselves more appealing to men using external beauty, while Barbara's statements are more about women's empowerment and getting men to "see you as a human being with all of your inner beauty." The irony of course is that we have seen Elaine do all this to no avail. Near the end of the film when Elaine returns to the burlesque club, we see the creepy blonde twins up onstage dancing, putting what Gahan and Barbara taught them into practice. It is not sexy and not seductive, just eerie and off-putting. Two other dancers comment to each other about the twins, saying that the girls cannot dance well and they are actually pretty creepy. The twins' performance on stage resists visual pleasure and instead turns them into camp objects.

Biller's films regularly acknowledge the tensions between feminist politics and post-feminist discourse. Angela McRobbie describes post-feminism as "an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined."[41] Post-feminist discourse takes feminism into account, acknowledging its contributions, but rendering it no longer necessary, beneficial, or out of date. Although Biller unquestionably critiques the patriarchy from a feminist perspective in the film, she complicates the debate by pondering the "solution" to women's problems with the patriarchy. For example, the film poses the question of whether or not it is productive or feminist to "reappropriate" tools

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[41] Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 255.

of the patriarchy to achieve women's goals. In doing this, camp becomes a recurring and useful tool in the film for illuminating the ironies and contradictions of both patriarchal fantasies of romance and feminist solutions to oppression. Thus, camp serves in the film to blur the line between feminism and post-feminism and "camp" post-feminism in order to make a case that feminism is still needed, even if it is also flawed.

Pamela Robertson describes feminist camp as a tool for better understanding how women negotiate their assigned roles in patriarchal culture. Robertson's exploration of Madonna as a feminist camp icon addresses the question of postfeminism and camp. Robertson notes that feminist scholars have debated Madonna's use of camp in her performances and persona, asking whether it is parody or pastiche and questioning whether her camp is "a healthy break from essentialism or a rejection of traditional feminist concerns."[42] The question, it seems, comes down to who and what Madonna is in service of—is she working for a sort of sex-positive feminism or is she working for the sexist patriarchy? Part of Madonna's brand involves "the manipulation of negative stereotypes" through the reappropriation of controlling images and behaviors that are otherwise normally viewed as tacky, crass, or unladylike. Indeed, Madonna is the epitome of the unruly woman.[43] Robertson suggests that Madonna's relationship to camp is not so much as an originator of feminist camp or as someone who adds something "new," but rather as a performer of camp who "bring[s] camp to the forefront in a transnational consumer society" by making visible to the mainstream the camp work

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[42] Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996.
[43] Kathleen Karlyn Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

already being done by members of the queer Black and Latinx community with vogueing and ball culture, for example. For scholars and critics, Madonna is a complicated combination of cultural appropriation, cultural commodification, and innovative mainstreaming of queer politics into popular culture. It is precisely the public perception of Madonna as a powerful pop culture icon, Robertson insists, that fuel the controversies around her performances. Robertson claims that Camp has experienced two important changes since the 1960s: the popularization of a heterosexualized and postmodernized camp, and a shift to "overtly politicized camp and radical drag."

Much of the existing feminist scholarship on post-feminism looks to media and popular culture, including film and television, as the primary sites where post-feminist discourse is presented and promoted. Perhaps ironically, as feminism increasingly enters the mainstream and popular culture, growing less and less taboo, feminism seems to get diluted. As more and more celebrities "come out" as feminist and as "feminism" and "feminist" become more common terms in the mainstream media, post-feminist discourse thrives and grows, albeit de-politicizing feminism. Angela McRobbie claims that postfeminism pretends to be doing the work of feminism, but is actually undoing feminism and—under the guise of "freedom" and "choice," rendering feminism unnecessary and outdated for young women today (millennials). Postfeminism is different, she insists, then feminist backlash. McRobbie explains, "post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings

which emphasize that it is no longer needed, but a spent force."[44] With the rise of post-feminist discourse and heightened "feminist" visibility, feminist-baiting now functions to sell merchandise, attract audience, gain followers and supporters, and ultimately undermine feminist politics by appearing to pass as feminist politics (a sort of faux feminism, if you will).

Second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s called for sexual liberation, women's autonomy, challenging hegemonic gender norms, among other political agendas. Following the revolutionizing impact of women's liberation on popular culture and media, the 1980s saw a mainstream backlash against those political and cultural gains. Postfeminism soon emerged as a sort of response to the backlash, as if trying to find a compromise between feminist politics and backlash against those politics. Postfeminism acknowledges that feminism was at one point useful, even necessary, but considers it outdated and no longer needed today, no longer relevant for women. Gill suggests that with the recent new visibilities of feminism and celebrity feminists in the mainstream and popular culture, albeit often presenting a somewhat diluted feminism, that perhaps we are in a post-postfeminist moment, or at least that postfeminism has not completely eradicated feminist politics.

Film critics, too, have also noted that the film engages with and even provokes feminist debates. In his review of the film, A.O. Scott notes that "Elaine scrambles every available gender signal, embodying and demolishing clichés in ways that will set off interesting, potentially awkward discussions once the movie is over. She smashes the

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[44] McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 255.

distinctions that structure contemporary debates about feminism and women—between power and submission, objectification and empowerment, sisterhood and individualism, victimhood and vengeance."[45]

The film's protagonist, Elaine, the love witch, is a post-feminist anti-hero. She offers feminist critiques of the patriarchy and women's role in it, but her solutions to these things align with post-feminist discourse. In a sense, Elaine wants to have her cake and eat it too. She wants to use the "master's tools" (patriarchal gender norms, sex, objectification) to get ahead and get what she wants in the master's own game (patriarchy). She wants the fairytale princess romance, but does not want to have to deal with all the sexist and misogynist baggage that comes with it. In that sense, Elaine is arguably the post-feminist of the film, and Trish, her realtor who becomes her friend and ultimately her competition, is the feminist.

Similar debates about feminism occur in *Viva* between Barbi/Viva and her friend Sheila/Candy. The conversations between the two highlight debates about what is feminist and what counts as liberation. When Barbi and Sheila go to the Madam's office where they sign-up to be call girls, Sheila is excited but Barbi is hesitant. Sheila exclaims, "I've always wanted to be a prostitute, it sounds so romantic!" Meanwhile, Barbi asks Sheila, "Isn't prostitution morally wrong?" Sheila's response defines prostitution as liberating for women, insisting that it is part of the sexual revolution, "it's taking part of our newfound freedom, everybody's doing it!" Sheila frames sex work as an adventure where women can explore their sexuality. Earlier in the film, when Barbi and Sheila go

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[45] A.O. Scott, "Review: *The Love Witch*," 2016.

out in public as "liberated women" for the first time, both are braless (a nod to the trope of the bra burning feminist) and wearing revealing clothing. When Barbi worries, telling Sheila that they can't go out on the streets like this, Sheila defiantly replies, "Are you kidding? This is the 1970s. We're liberated women now. We're dressing for ourselves."

The conversations back and forth between Barbi and Sheila about how to be liberated women expose the ironies and double bind in feminist liberation. Is the braless feminist liberated, or just giving patriarchy what it wants? Barbi and Sheila are mistaken for sex workers, not feminists, before they sign up to be call girls because of their clothes. They try to walk the fine line between dressing sexy but not slutty, being classy but not too stuffy. Moments like this in the film speak to debates in feminism about respectability politics, sex-positive feminism, and postfeminism.

Rosalind Gill argues for the need to "think together feminism with anti-feminism, postfeminism, and revitalized misogyny."[46] She thus challenges claims that new feminist visibilities in popular culture render postfeminism out of date or the concept not applicable. Gill proposes what she refers to as a "theoretical defense of postfeminism" and insists it is still a useful "critical analytical category" that can help us to better understand the nuances and complexities of discourses around feminism. Elaine and Trish represent different perspectives within feminism. At first consideration, Elaine appears to be the feminist of the film. However, I want to suggest that Elaine might actually be the *postfeminist* subject of the film.

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[46] Rosalind Gill, "Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 625.

Diane Negra describes the postfeminist subject as represented in media and popular culture as being portrayed as "having lost herself" and "re-finding herself" through romance and other postfeminist master narratives like makeovers and shopping.[47] Elaine wants love and believes that the way to get love from men is to "give men what they want," which leads her to dress the part, so to speak, of the kind of woman who men are attracted to in popular culture and movies. In fact, Elaine has developed her own sort of postfeminist contract that she holds the men to (they are unaware of it, of course). Elaine tells Trish that sex is what unlocks men's love potential. Thus, she gives the men what they want (sex) and demands love and loyalty in return. However, when the men begin to, as Elaine describes it, "act like a girl," and start getting emotional, clingy, and whiny, Elaine is turned off and no longer interested, insisting that she wants "a real man." This causes the men to either die of heartbreak, as in the case of the first two victims in the film (Wayne and Trish's husband Richard), or leads Elaine to kill them (as is implied with her ex-husband Jerry who she mentions throughout the film, as well as with Griff, the cop she seduces and has a fairytale wedding with at the Renaissance Faire).

In some ways, Elaine is a post-feminist heroine (or anti-hero, depending how you look at it). Her practice of witchcraft functions as a stand-in for feminism. Witchcraft promises to give Elaine what she wants (love), but she never actually gets it. In her speech to Griff at the burlesque bar near the end of the film, after he begins to question her, challenging her intentions ("love") and questioning her use of witchcraft, Elaine explains:

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[47] Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (Routledge, 2009).

> All my life I've been tossed in the garbage, except when men wanted to use my body. So I decided to find my own power. And I found that power through witchcraft. That means that I take what I need from men and not the other way around.

After this, Griff tells Elaine that her tactics are not going to work this time, and that he will have to arrest her, to which she retorts, "What for? Marrying a lover according to my religion? Seducing a married man? I know 400 years ago you could be burned for a thing like that, but not today." Griff responds that Elaine will not be burned, but arrested for violating the law. Here, Biller is making a comment about how, despite women like Elaine adapting to the patriarchy, it manages to find a way to "tame" women like Elaine and keep them in their place (whether burning them at the stake or imprisoning them figuratively or literally). Elaine's explanation to Griff at the bar sounds like a feminist essay about women's oppression, with Elaine even offering a "solution" to the problem. Ironically, but also very fitting for the occasion, Elaine's speech takes place in a burlesque club, where women strip and perform for a mostly male audience.

Biller's films creates space for a feminist self-reflexivity. Biller, a self-proclaimed feminist, effectively puts feminist film theory into practice (by reappropriating the gaze and the spectacle) but also offers moments where she questions feminist politics and opens up debates about what counts as "feminist." The character Trish, the realtor/interior designer who befriends Elaine early in the film, functions as another version of feminist in the film. Most of Elaine and Trish's "feminist debates" take place over the course of several scenes in a modern-day Victorian tea room restaurant. This is a women's only space (we know this because Trish's husband Richard is scolded when he enters the space to see Trish) decorated in pastels and lots of pink and frills where women dress up

in old-fashioned Victorian-style clothing and have tea and cakes with other women. The space feels like a time warp, and is another example of camp in the film, where Biller creates a camp effect by juxtaposing old-fashioned or traditionally patriarchal spaces (Victorian era sex-segregated spaces, burlesque clubs, etc.) with feminist debates the characters are having. The space of the Victorian tea room camps post-feminism by taking post-feminist romantic fantasies to an extreme, showcasing excessive femininity and highlighting the irony in Victorian nostalgia and fairytale fantasies. Yet even though we see it as ironic space, Biller does not dismiss the space of the Victorian tea room or the Victorian era as entirely antifeminist. Instead, she seems to suggest that embracing these spaces and the fantasies that go along with them without interrogating them leads to a sort of post-feminist ambivalence. This post-feminist ambivalence, a post-feminist revisionist history, is what Biller is worried about—acknowledging that times were once bad for women, but feminism came along and made things better and now it is ok to retreat to the past and let feminism go. Biller's proposed alternative—in her Victorian tea room scenes—is to recreate the past from a feminist perspective, not in spite of it.

In the first Victorian tea room scene, Trish admits to Elaine that she loves "Victoriana" and Elaine reveals that she loves fairytales and dreams of being carried away by her Prince Charming. Trish admits with guilt that she also has those princess fantasies sometimes, even though she thinks they are ridiculous. This is where Biller's juxtaposition of Elaine and Trish's characters highlights the differences—albeit nuanced—between feminism and post-feminism. Elaine tells Trish that she has been studying men and thinks she knows the formula to get what she wants (love), and that she was "brought back to life as a witch" after her ex-husband left her and broke her heart.

Trish is intrigued and asks Elaine for the formula. When Elaine explains that her formula is sex, that "giving men sex is a way to unlock their love potential," Trish tells her "it sounds like you've been brainwashed by the patriarchy. Your whole self-worth is wrapped up in pleasing a man." Although Trish also guiltily admits that she used sex to get her engagement ring (and a marriage proposal), but that she's "not proud of it." The difference between Elaine and Trish's different feminisms is perhaps best summed-up when Elaine insists that you have to give men their fantasy, and Trish retorts that "a husband is not a prince and life is not a fairytale."

Feminist politics also call into question the ways in which romantic comedies depict and define romance. What gets to count as romantic in many romantic comedies reinforces the same patriarchal norms and prescriptive gender roles that feminists have long challenged. Actions like stalking become "sweet" or "sexy" when a man is following around a woman (*The Graduate*; *There's Something About Mary*; *Love Actually*; any film where the man waits outside a woman's window or sneaks into her room). Romantic comedies often sugarcoat sexism and misogyny with humor, making it easier to go down. Linda Mizejewski points out that violence was a genre issue for screwball romantic comedies from the 1930s and 1940s. These films often included "madcap" elements that effectively allowed for the expression of male aggression against women while also allowing women to be "unruly" and "talk back" to that aggression.[48] Both camp and the romance genre tend to be not taken seriously. Rather, they are both considered excessive. By presenting the aesthetics of romance as camp, it turns parts of

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[48] Linda Mizejewski, *It Happened One Night* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). 32-33.

the master narrative of romance (meet cute, seduction, wedding) into comedic moments and sometimes also moments of horror.

For example, in the Renaissance Faire sequence, when Elaine and Griff stumble upon the Ren Faire while horseback riding near the woods, they witness and participate in various scenes of romance. Their long kiss invokes the over-dramatic kissing scenes in classic Hollywood films by Alfred Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk melodramas. The world of the Renaissance Fair is clearly defined by distinct gender roles. The men engage in masculinity competitions like fencing. The women dance and cheer on from the side. The jester is the one person who does not fit into the prescribed gender roles, a queer background performer whose sole role is to entertain, but cuts to his reaction shots show that even though he does not fit in, he watches and comments on the performances and is there to support the heteronormative fairytale fantasy (he even encourages Elaine and Griff to participate in a wedding ceremony there). Renaissance Faires in general are sites of nostalgia and romanticized patriarchal gender norms and fairytale-like fantasies of love and courtship. Interestingly, Biller seems to be suggesting that we need not throw out these scenes of patriarchy or their master narratives, but rather that we should re-write them, or repurpose them for feminist politics.

The Renaissance Faire wedding complicates the film's feminist politics and contributes to Biller's parody of post-feminism. The Renaissance Faire conveys an aesthetics of romanticized love, yet it looks like the epitome of patriarchy and traditional heteronormative gender roles. Despite seemingly representing all that Elaine opposes, it is ultimately what Elaine wants, chivalry and the fairytale. Similarly, Elaine's strip teases also look like they are feeding into patriarchy's objectification of women, but it is a

means for Elaine to get what she wants: the fairytale kind of love like at the Ren Faire. Through Elaine's conflicting feminist/post-feminist politics, Biller exposes the kind of diluted pseudo-feminism that she takes issue with and poses the question of what women really want (feminist empowerment or sexist fairytale fantasy). She also seems conflicted about whether women should have to choose—can they have the fairytale fantasy and also be feminist and empowered, and does feminism help women get what they want or does it get in the way?

In some ways, *Viva* reads as a post-feminist morality tale, too. At first glance, the film could be read as a story about a bored housewife who wants to experience liberation, realizes it comes at a cost that is dangerous, violent, and not all it's cracked up to be, and decides to go back to her husband and live happily ever after in the suburbs. That version might read as a sort of feminist anti-pornography, respectability politics-oriented morality tale. *VIVA* is not that morality tale, in part because of its ending. At the end of the film, after Barbi decides to give up sex work and end her "wild streak," she gets a call from Arthur, one of the men she met at one of the sex parties who made nudie films. He tells her that he is done with nudes—they are "out of fashion"—people are bored with nudity, so he is putting on a theatrical show and wants Barbi to be part of it. Barbi gets to have her cake and eat it too!

When Barbi accepts the offer and tells her husband Rick, he is happy for her, but asks if she will be back in time for dinner, to which she cheerfully replies "of course!" The dinner question and Barbi's response are a parody of old films and sitcoms where the women are always back in time to make a full course meal for dinner. It also speaks to the problem of the "second shift," where women who worked, many as a result of

feminist gains in the workplace, were still burdened by traditional gender roles that rendered women as homemakers. Rick's question and Barbi's response is a campy interruption of Barbi's good news—parodying patriarchy's obsession with who makes dinner—and serving as a reminder that "happy endings" for women do not erase the patriarchy. The final scene of the film is at the theater, where Barbi and Sheila perform for Arthur and Mark in an otherwise empty theater. Their performance is a nod to Classic Hollywood films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and *The Dolly Sisters* (1945), as they wear matching red sequins dresses and dance in unison while singing that they can be "free." The song lyrics, written by Biller herself, are facetious and a campy play on the types of "feminism" in songs like "Diamonds Are A Girls' Best Friend."

> We can be lovers, mothers, singers, swingers, friends
> We can be what we want to be
> We can be free
> We can have it all
> We're havin a ball
> We've come a long way baby
> Viva la vita
> We've arrived

The irony here of course is that that "freedom" is still limited in a sexist patriarchal culture. Billers suggests that the promises of sexual liberation and feminism have not so much freed women as they have created more ways to oppress them (Biller presents this somewhat seriously and somewhat facetiously).

A common theme Biller addresses in her films is the question of what counts as women's liberation and empowerment. Biller presents images for the audience and poses the question—are these symbols of liberation or oppression? In *VIVA*, erotic paintings line the walls in multiple male character's houses. Are these celebrating the female form

or reducing women to their bodies? When Barbi/Viva wants to launch a modeling career and poses seductively for provocative photographs for male photographers, is she sexually liberated or being used by men for their pleasure? The film shows Barbi/Viva reading various magazines—*Playboy*, *Viva*, *Good Housekeeping*—and poses the question, which one is the feminist magazine? Biller's feminist camp gaze challenges feminist viewers to re-consider what counts as liberation and oppression and in doing so, reassess their feminist politics.

Anna Biller's films are different than Cheryl Dunye and Bruce LaBruce's in that they are not telling stories that we have not seen before. Dunye's films tell stories about black lesbians, older lesbians, genderfluid queer people—stories that we have not seen on screen until recently. LaBruce makes films about radical political extremists, revolutionaries, sexual subcultures—also stories that tend to be excluded from the mainstream narratives. Biller, on the other hand, makes films that tell a feminist version of a sexploitation film, a feminist take on a traditional romance narrative, and a feminist take on a Western damsel in distress story. Biller's content and characters are not things we have not seen on screen before—that's not what's new about her work. What's new is how she tells the stories, her tone, the ways she interruptions the traditional narrative—the camp.

Biller's current project, according to her website, is a feature film based on the tale of Bluebeard, a folklore character famous for being a wealthy man who married women and then killed them, with the exception of one wife who fought back. In a sense, the story of Bluebeard is already a feminist tale (the part about the one wife who fights

her “fate”), which makes it perfect fodder for Biller to add her feminist auteur stamp and feminist camp gaze on a tale we think we know.

Chapter Two: Uses of Camp in Rethinking Identity and Spectatorship in the Work of Cheryl Dunye

Dunye's 2012 *Mommy Is Coming* opens with the unpacking of a suitcase full of fetish objects to the sound of playful carnival-like music. Inside the suitcase we see props that double as tools for violence and pleasure—handcuffs, a gun—as well as a Hitachi Magic Wand vibrator and a photo of an older woman who we will find out is Helen, the mom of Dylan, one of our main characters. An intertitle appears in a playful font on the screen. It reads: "Once upon a time in Berlin…" reminiscent of the classic fairytale beginning but alluding to the playful "campiness" with the suitcase items and playful music.

Next, we see Dylan, a young white woman with short cropped blonde hair and thick black glasses get into a taxicab with a suitcase. The taxicab driver is none other than our filmmaker, Cheryl Dunye. In typical Cheryl Dunye fashion, she functions in the film as a spectator. Here she is the outsider through whom we can experience and filter the rape fantasy scenario that is about to unfold in her cab. Soon after Dylan gets into the cab, the cab makes another stop to let in Claudia, a racially ambiguous, gender ambiguous butch woman (played by the trans activist, performance artist, and porn actor Ignacio Rivera/Papí Coxx). Then the rape fantasy scenario begins to play out. Claudia penetrates Dylan with a gun with a condom on it. Meanwhile, Dunye as the cabbie looks in her rearview mirror and is simultaneously shocked and turned on by what she sees. At

one point Claudia holds out a big dildo and asks Dylan in a serious tone, “Is this what you want?,” to which Dylan replies “Please.” We see that Dunye’s cabbie is now trying to multitask in the front seat as she masturbates while driving. The rape fantasy comes to an end when Dylan expresses to Claudia that she wants to penetrate or “top” her. We learn that this is not their first time having sex, nor is it the first time Dylan has wanted to top Claudia, who refuses every time. This opening scene sets the stage for the film’s farcical story about sexual re-awakenings and accessing new forms of pleasure.

In this chapter I explore the work of black lesbian filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, focusing on how she uses camp to play with and challenge feminist notions of the gaze, spectatorship, and pleasure. Moreover, Dunye posits herself as a self-reflexive camp subject who blurs the lines between camp subject and object. I situate Dunye’s work in the context of black feminist scholarship on the gaze, work on disidentification, lesbian representation, and feminist perspectives about sex and consent. I argue that Dunye’s work uses camp to reorient the spectator to see stereotypes, identity, and pleasure differently. Furthermore, Dunye’s feminist camp gaze invites the viewer to temporarily suspend feminist critique and set aside feminist political correctness in order to reflect on and challenge our allegiance to our identities and ideologies. We do not realize that the rape fantasy scenario is consensual until halfway through the scene. The campiness of the scene, including the playful music, the intertitle, and the toy suitcase right before it, function to temporarily suspend our feminist critique.

Cheryl Dunye is perhaps best known for being a trailblazer for black lesbians in film. Her first feature film, *The Watermelon Woman*, is considered the first feature film by a black lesbian filmmaker and is a staple in many Feminist Film Studies classes. Black

feminist film scholar Terri Francis celebrates Dunye's contributions to storytelling, and particularly the ways in which her direct address to the camera, self-reflexive, comedic style resonates today.[1] Francis points out that Issa Rae's mirror raps in *Insecure* "play as if a remix of Dunye's director address to the camera" in Dunye's earlier films.[2]

Born in 1966 in Monrovia, Liberia, Dunye emigrated to the United States with her family as a child and grew up Philadelphia. After earning an undergraduate degree from Temple University and an M.F.A. from Rutgers, Dunye made student films that explored issues surrounding sexuality, racism, identity, the lesbian community, and interracial relationships. Dunye made *The Watermelon Woman* for about $300,000, a relatively tiny budget for a feature film. Dunye and the film received criticism from conservatives who were upset that the film, which they considered to be obscene (mainly due to the interracial lesbian sex scene) was funded in part by an NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) grant. After *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye continued to make independent films using her experimental narrative style and telling stories about those on the margins of mainstream representation, specifically black women, lesbians, queer folks, and trans* folks. Dunye has also directed and written a couple of mainstream films and has taught film at several different colleges and universities. Out of the three filmmakers I discuss in this dissertation, Dunye has the most experience working inside Hollywood, mainly due to her more recent work directing for episodic television, including directing episodes of *Queen Sugar*, *The Chi*, *Claws*, *The Fosters*, and *All Rise*. Dunye's film collaborations

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[1] Terri Francis, "Structural Laughter and Constructed Intimacies: The Self-Reflexivity of Cheryl Dunye," *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2018): 45-54.
[2] Ibid.

reveal her wide network of lesbians and black women working in Hollywood. Dunye has directed episodic television for Oprah's OWN Network and worked on shows created by Ava DuVernay and Lena Waithe. Furthermore, many of Dunye's early collaborators and colleagues are part of the who's who in lesbian Hollywood and lesbian literary circles, including Guin Turner, Sarah Schulman, Lisa Gornick, Anna Margarita Albelo, Jamie Babbit, V.S. Brodie, and Alexandra Juhasz. Dunye stands out for her unique experimental narrative style, self-reflexivity, and being unapologetically out as a black lesbian filmmaker.

Dunye's background in film, like Anna Biller's, is grounded in advanced academic study of film history and filmmaking. Dunye is an analytical, self-reflexive filmmaker who uses the tools and strategies of camp to talk back to mainstream (Hollywood) representations as well as call out the feminist community for some of its exclusionary practices and dogmatic stances on certain issues. Dunye is very much an auteur filmmaker with a signature style, although she does talk about trying to make her films a collaborative process between director, writer, crew, and actors. Still, Dunye maintains a high degree of creative control over her projects and repeatedly employs a unique and easily recognizable experimental storytelling style in the majority of her work.[3] In fact, Dunye's style is so unique that she gives it its own name—The Dunyementary. The Dunyementary blends narrative and documentary techniques to create a reflexive, analytical, and provocative spectator experience. Dunye is often

[3] In *The OWLS*, Dunye says that she wanted to make a collaborative film project with everybody's input, but others involved with the film seem to acknowledge that it is still undeniably a Dunye film, with her stamp and perspective on it.

categorized as part of New Queer Cinema for her style and content. Like the films of other New Queer Cinema filmmakers, Dunye's films have a gritty realness to them, are low budget, challenge traditional linear narrative storytelling structure, are sexually explicit, sex-positive, and are unapologetically gay. Dunye's use of camp also aligns her with other New Queer Cinema filmmakers who have used camp strategies to make political commentary, parody genres, and engage with the past.[4]

The New Queer Cinema movement, as coined and documented by film critic B. Ruby Rich in 1992 after observing a trend at the Toronto International Film Festival and Sundance Film Festival, refers to films by queer independent filmmakers that challenged the status quo with their different aesthetics, tone, representations of sex and sexuality, and queer narratives.[5] Common elements of New Queer Cinema films include challenging traditional Hollywood continuity conventions and linear structure, explicit sex scenes with same-sex sexuality at the forefront, and an embrace of "Queer" and exploration of queer identity and differences within the queer community (which makes these films particularly useful for challenging the gay "single story" in Hollywood and mainstream representations and exploring intra-group conflicts and differences within the queer community). Emerging in the 1980s and 1990s at the height of the AIDS crisis and epidemic, many of the films also explored the impact of HIV/AIDS on the queer community (particularly queer men) and emphasized living in the moment and the looming threat of death due to the HIVS/AIDS crisis.

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[4] Glyn Davis, "Camp and Queer and the New Queer Director," in *New Queer Cinema*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 53-67.
[5] B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," in *New Queer Cinema*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 15-22.

Although the New Queer Cinema movement was largely dominated by queer male filmmakers and narratives about queer men (and the scholarship tends to primarily focus on these films), there is a rich and under-explored history of lesbian queer cinema. Here I refer to "Lesbian Queer Cinema" to discuss films by and/or about lesbian or queer women that are part of the New Queer Cinema movement or tradition in terms of when they were produced, their style, tone, and aesthetics, and the types of representations in the films (unabashed queer women characters, explicit sex scenes, portrayals of the lesbian community).

Scholarship on Queer Cinema tends to acknowledge it as inherently political and transgressive. Yet this scholarship tends to not address the ways in which Queer Cinema engages with feminist politics. If Queer Cinema is inherently political and destabilizes the heteronormative status quo, invoking a queer gaze, we need to consider how feminist politics influences queer cinema, and moreover, the role that camp plays in communicating and interrogating feminist politics in queer cinema. For example, we can consider the ways in which Dunye and Bruce LaBruce use camp to challenge feminist and queer politics. In an interview at the 2012 San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival talks about using her films to push boundaries, push buttons, and "stretch out the areas we've become comfortable with."[6]

Despite the fact that most scholarship on New Queer Cinema tends to focus on films by and about gay men, some scholars have explored lesbian New Queer Cinema

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[6] Frameline, "Frameline36: Mommy Is Coming Interview, YouTube video, 7:06, July 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h-TXb9TgKU.

films, often noting the films' camp qualities and camp effect.[7] Films like *Go Fish* (1994), *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), *But I'm A Cheerleader* (1999), and *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007) all intentionally "camp" patriarchy, heteronormativity, stereotypes, and differences within the lesbian subculture for comedic effect to laugh *with* the filmmakers and the characters, rather than *at* them. All of the mentioned films talk back to the mainstream as well as to feminism and lesbians, interrogating feminist ideology without abandoning or ridiculing it. *Go Fish* makes a feminist statement about heteronormativity and compulsory marriage while also exposing stigma about gender expression, bisexuality, and sexual practices within the lesbian community. *The Watermelon Woman* exposes and talks back to intersectional stereotypes of black women and black lesbians in the mainstream while also exploring racism within the lesbian community. *But I'm A Cheerleader* critiques heterosexism and compulsory traditional gender roles while also commenting on biases about gender expression and sexual practices in the LGBTQ community. *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, directed by Jamie Babbit, who also directed *But I'm A Cheerleader*, explores a feminist activist group that tries to fight patriarchy and oppression on the ground while also dealing with tensions and divides within the group.[8]

Scholarship on camp has mostly overlooked camp by black women and black queer women. As noted in the Introduction chapter, much of the camp scholarship has been dominated by white gay men, with camp traditionally being associated almost

[7] Glyn Davis, "Camp and Queer and the New Queer Director," in *New Queer Cinema*, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 53-67.
[8] Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*, 2017. Specifically, see Katrin Horn's discussion of camp in Jamie Babbit's films.

exclusively with the gay male community. When Pamela Robertson wrote about women and camp, it opened the floodgates for more work about women as camp subjects/producers, as did studies on lesbian traditions of camp and community building and recognition. I want to suggest that discussions of black queer women's camp exist, albeit by a different name (not being referred to as "camp"), perhaps because camp scholarship has long overlooked or ignored black queer women's contributions. In her discussion of Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*, Karin Wimbley connects Dunye to womanist traditions and describes Dunye's use of stereotypes and parody in ways that resonate with camp, specifically how camp can function as a recuperative strategy for finding deeper meaning and pleasure in oppressive images.[9] Wimbley argues that "Dunye is part of a womanist tradition that employs the Mammy stereotype to reconstruct and recuperate black womanhood from the pervasiveness of the racial stereotype." What Wimbley describes sounds a lot like camp. What she refers to as the strategy of "stereotypy" is a type of parody that reappropriates stereotypes for visibility and critical critique of the past. In this chapter I want to build upon Wimbley's discussion of *The Watermelon Woman* as "stereotypy" to posit Dunye's work as camp by exploring the ways in which her work features what Shugart and Waggoner describe as key characteristics of camp (aesthetics, irony, parody, performance, and resistance). In addition to looking at how Dunye camps Hollywood tropes of black women, I want to explore how Dunye also applies these strategies to talk back to feminism.

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[9] Karin Wimbley, "Stereotypy, Mammy, and Recovery in Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*," in *Sisters in the Life*, eds. Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 143-159.

I want to connect Dunye's work to camp to explore how she uses camp strategies to play with narrative structure, rethink representations of black (queer) women, and explore lesbian identity and intra-group differences. I look to Dunye's independent feature films, including *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), *The OWLS* (2010), and *Mommy Is Coming* (2012) to consider the ways in which they use camp (or in the case of *The OWLS*, resist opportunities for camp) to encourage us to look differently at what we think we already know. *The Watermelon Woman* is a narrative film about a young black lesbian filmmaker in Philadelphia named Cheryl (played by Dunye) who embarks on a research project to find more about a black woman credited only as "The Watermelon Woman" in old Hollywood films. As she dives further into research she starts to question and reassess her own relationships and perspective on race, gender, and sexuality and decides that multiple points of view are possible and that hers is just as valid and necessary as everyone else's, even if it's been underrepresented. *The OWLS* (2010), which Dunye co-wrote with Sarah Schulman, is a Dunyementary neo-noir about two older lesbian couples whose lives are falling apart as they are haunted by the death of a younger lesbian at a house party a year ago.[10] When a stranger shows up one night, a young genderqueer lesbian, they have to start talking about what happened that tragic

[10] Lesbian filmmaker Anna Margarita Albelo made a documentary called *Hooters!* (2010), a campy look at the behind-the-scenes making of *The OWLS*, exploring the inter-generational conflicts on set and extensive discussions and debates about lesbian identity and representation. A review of the film on *After Ellen* describes *Hooters!* as "the best lesbian film no one has seen." See Marcie Bianco, "Review: 'Hooters' is the best lesbian film no one has ever seen," *After Ellen*, September 3, 2013, https://www.afterellen.com/movies/196161-review-hooters-is-the-best-lesbian-film-youve-never-seen.

night and in doing so rethink their alliances to each other. For *Mommy Is Coming* (2012), Dunye teamed up again with Sarah Schulman to co-write the script. The film is a farcical sex comedy set in present-day Berlin about Claudia, a queer, masculine-presenting, racially ambiguous woman who wants a monogamous relationship with her polyamorous white femme polyamorous girlfriend and goes on a journey of sexual exploration. The film combines romance and porn and is Dunye's only film to feature multiple sex scenes and hardcore pornography. Incorporating elements of Dunye's signature Dunyementary style, including direct address to the camera and Dunye's presence as a "spectator" in several scenes, *Mommy Is Coming* orients the viewer toward a camp reading. This, along with its campy tone, screwball characters, and Dunye's reputation as a feminist filmmaker, encourages a temporary suspension of feminist critique so that the viewer can challenge their ideas about sex, pleasure, and sexual taboos during sex scenes that involve roleplay, BDSM and sex dungeons, and one particularly complicated yet comedic scene involving a character having sex with her mother.

At its core, Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* is a film about the politics and pleasures in looking. The film shows how watching Hollywood films, or any films for that matter, always involve layers of looking that often go unnoticed because they are masked by technical tricks and tools that work to normalize the types of images and stories we see on screen. Dunye wants us to look differently and she invites the viewer to do that by making parodies of Hollywood films, adding extra commentary, and showing parts of the filmmaking, research, and spectatorship process.

Dunye, like Anna Biller, is a cinephile who loves watching old movies but is frustrated by a lot of Hollywood's representations of women (and, for Dunye, specifically

black women). However, unlike Biller, Dunye confronts the racism of Hollywood head-on, engaging directly with the racism of representation and the complexities of addressing intersectionality on screen. Dunye's cinephile-filmmaking and use of camp to rethink the past differs from Biller's in another way. While Biller actually revisits the past in her films by often setting her films in another period (the 1800s and 1970s, for example), Dunye only engages with the past to unpack the complexities of the present and, in a presentist-sense, to consider the ways in which the present can inform our interpretation of the past. Dunye literally recreates old movie scenes, re-directing them from her black feminist camp perspective, with her core narratives taking place in present-day. Biller sets her entire films in the past (in the case of *VIVA* and her short film "A Visit From The Incubus") or, in the case of *The Love Witch*, plays with time period and nostalgia through production design, costumes, props, hairstyles, and set pieces. Dunye's films acknowledge Hollywood's inability or refusal to make space for black lesbian visibility and strive to create black lesbian representation for the present-day, while Biller's films acknowledge (white) women's hypervisibility and one-sided representation in Hollywood, and strive to recreate Hollywood's typical narratives and visuals in order to manipulate them for a feminist gaze.

In *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye the filmmaker plays Cheryl a filmmaker who works at a video rental store, films weddings to fund her project, and is involved in a temporary interracial romance with *Go Fish*'s Guinevere Turner.[11] Cheryl

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[11] *Go Fish*, directed by Rose Troche (Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1994), DVD. *Go Fish* was written by Guinevere Turner and is perhaps the best-known lesbian film of what B. Ruby Rich coined as the "New Queer Cinema" movement.

speaks directly to the camera throughout the film, breaking the fourth wall, to explain to us her current project. She decides to explore the life and work of a black actress she saw in an "old plantation film" who was struck Cheryl as beautiful and talented and yet was only credited as "The Watermelon Woman." As she delves through archives, other people's personal photographs and letters, and interviews people who knew "The Watermelon Woman" (whose name she "learns" was actually "Fae Richards—Faith Richardson"), Cheryl realizes that she has a lot in common with Fae, including her identity as a black lesbian and her romantic and sexual relationship with a white woman. By the end of the film, viewers are fully committed to Cheryl's project to rewrite history by creating a film about a black lesbian woman who could only be recognized in relation to the stereotypes she played during the Jim Crow era. However, at the end of the film, after viewers have witnessed her struggle to piece together "lost history," she candidly breaks down for us what exactly her project means (and at this point we are not sure if she is still talking about her documentary on Fae or the narrative film Dunye is making). Cheryl addresses the camera and declares that this means hope, possibility, visibility, and a history for those marginalized like herself that is otherwise overlooked by the master narratives. Finally, after seeing the history Cheryl has compiled, an intertitle flashes on screen. It tells us that "sometimes you have to create your own history—"The Watermelon Woman" is fiction." In this moment, as Dunye "confesses," we realize that Cheryl (the character) and Dunye (the filmmaker) completely made up the entire story of Fae Richards, albeit she wove it together with fragments of actual facts, actual people, and her own personal experiences. In doing this, Dunye not only makes (and answers) a call to action for more black female (and specifically black lesbian) visibility and history,

she also challenges us to question what is "real," what is "history," and to think about how looking differently and looking intersectionally can offer us new insight as to the power, pleasure, and shortcomings of representation.

Dunye's work, as a whole, engages with a politics of representation that pushes beyond simplistic depictions of race, gender, and sexuality. Stuart Hall describes the "politics of representation" as the "second phase" in black representation and black cultural politics that complicates black visibility by taking more subject positions into account.[12] Speaking specifically about black representation, Hall explains that the first phase, a "relations of representation" is more concerned with the issue of access to visibility and engages with a politics of respectability because, due to the lack of diversity in depictions of black people, it is trying to challenge the marginal, stereotypical, and fetishized images that disproportionately dominated black representation in the mainstream. This second phase then emerges after the "success" of the first. If the first phase is the liberal race message movies and Sidney Poitier "noble negro" characters, the second phase includes the explosion of different characters types like Blaxploitation heroes and heroines, the diversity of black characters in Spike Lee films, Eddie Murphy films, the women in *Set It Off*, Isaac Julien's queer black men, Leslie Harris's *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, and the queer black women in Cheryl Dunye's films. Hall describes the second phase, a politics of representation, as recognizing multiple black identities and a varied black experience by destabilizing the black subject. While Dunye's

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[12] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Black British Cultural Studies*, eds. Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 163-172.

The Watermelon Woman reflects the politics of representation in terms of black representation that Hall lays out, it also does this for lesbian/queer and feminist representation.

Black feminist scholars have long been unraveling and destabilizing the stereotypes of black women that have long controlled their representation in the mainstream.[13] Patricia Hill Collins argues that there is a correlation, even causation, between stereotypes and oppression.[14] She asserts that portraying African American women as their stereotypical character types (mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and "hot mommas") contributes to their oppression. For Collins, Black feminist thought is, at its core, invested in challenging these "controlling images."[15] Collins locates part of the "problem" of these images in African American "acceptance" of them, if even by default for not actively challenging them. Moreover, she places responsibility on the schools, news media, cinema, the internet, and government agencies (Althusser's repressive and ideological state apparatuses), claiming that it is often in these sites where these controlling, harmful images are reproduced.[16] Collins's proposed strategy for combatting these images involves confronting the institutions, including African American institutions, that perpetuate them and thus, in Collins's view, perpetuate black

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[13] Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, 2011; Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*, 2004; Michele Wallace, "Negative/Positive Images" in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, 1990.
[14] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 1990, 76.
[15] Ibid., 76.
[16] Ibid., 93.

women's oppression.[17] hooks asks how black women derive pleasure from going to the movies. hooks herself talks about her love for the movies yet also points out that images of black women have been overwhelmingly "negative," stereotypical, one-dimensional, and offensive. So where does the pleasure come from?

Black film scholars talk about the relationship between resistance and pleasure for spectators, with pleasure deriving in part from an active resistance with the image. In "The Oppositional Gaze," hooks makes the claim that looking is political because not everybody was supposed to (or allowed to) look. Thus, looking is inextricably linked to power relations. She describes how black women have had an "absent presence" in Hollywood, with their only purpose to be the "Other" and build up white womanhood as the object of the male gaze. Images of black women have also been overwhelmingly "negative," stereotypical, one-dimensional, and offensive, and yet many black women, including hooks herself, love the movies and derive pleasure from them. How does this happen? This is where hooks builds upon and expands Manthia Diawara's notion of "resisting spectatorship"[18] to argue that black female spectators develop an "oppositional" relationship to cinema that involves critically engaging with the images on

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[17] Although she does not engage with them in this book, Collins's argument here reminds me of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin's "anti-pornography" work in the realm of feminist legal theory, arguing that there is a direct correlation between pornography and women's subordination. A lot of the social science (sociology, political science) work on the topic of stereotypes and good/bad images tends to reflect Collins's view (see Hancock 2004; Harris-Perry 2011). Humanities work in English, Film Studies, Communications, Cultural Studies, and History tends to approach the issue in ways that destabilize the binary between good/bad and explore what stereotypes *do* for spectators, individual black women, and for work engaging in historiography and genealogy.
[18] Manthia Diawara, *Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance*," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Braudy and Cohen, Seventh edition, 2009.

screen by looking back, looking critically, not taking representations at face value, exerting agency by actively looking and not passively consuming, interrogating the images and their messages, looking when you're "not supposed" to look.[19]

Emphasizing the active process of spectatorship as a reimagining and community building effort, Jacqueline Stewart uses the phrase "reconstructive spectatorship" to describe an active process of fluidity, negotiation, and heterogeneity, and layering that recognizes the potential pleasures a spectator may experience by allowing oneself or refusing to get lost in the images on screen.[20] She asserts that African Americans carved "literal and symbolic" spaces for black spectatorship by reconstructing their individual and collective identities "in response to the classical system's moves toward narrative integration and in the wake of migration's fragmenting effects."[21] Reaching beyond the confines of the "positive images debate," Stewart explores how cinematic representations of African Americans, despite being overwhelmingly crude, stereotypical, and regressive, contributed to black urbanization and modernization, and how the cinema offered a space where recently migrated African Americans were not passive consumers but agents and active subjects who engaged *with* the images on screen.[22]

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[19] Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work* and Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* both exemplify this.
[20] Jacqueline Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves?: Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," 2003. Also discussed in Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 2005.
[21] Stewart, 2003, 653.
[22] Stewart, 2005.

Sex-positive Black feminists, including many who have helped shape a hip-hop feminist framework, have noted that the ways in which both "Black culture" and "Feminist culture" represent black women can be frustrating, either because the images are stereotypical or because black women are left out altogether.[23] Furthermore, they have noted that enjoying certain kinds of representation often make them feel like "Bad" members of their respective identity groups. Roxane Gay, for example, has noted that she often feels like a "Bad Feminist" because of some of the pop culture and media she consumes (and enjoys).[24] The concept of the "Bad Feminist" is connected to the notion of a "feminist political correctness" that dictates what counts as appropriate expressions of feminism. Feminism is a lens, a worldview, an ideology. It it is a way of viewing the world and dictates, to an extent, what "good" (read: ideologically consistent) feminist spectatorship entails, and what viewing pleasures are acceptable. Pamela Robertson's discussion of camp as a "guilty pleasure" speaks to this. I suggest that the feminist camp gaze encompasses the "Bad Feminist" and "guilty pleasure" feelings of liking something you are not supposed to like, but takes it a step further and plays with those "bad" images as a recuperative strategy for accessing pleasure. This is where feminist camp comes in as

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[23] My thoughts on stereotypes and "controlling images" are informed by the innovative and transgressive work of black feminist scholars and critics of popular culture and television who work within a hip-hop feminist framework (Joan Morgan, Treva Lindsey, Brittany Cooper, Imani Perry, and Lisa Thompson, among others). These scholars approach images from a sex positive perspective that challenges the prevailing paradigm that black women's bodies are always and only sites of pain and violence. Jennifer Nash's work on black women and pornography (2014) also uses a sex-positive black feminist framework to reimagine the ways in which a reading of racialized pornography through the lens of racial iconography can creates spaces for black women's agency and pleasure.

[24] Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (Harper Perennial, 2014).

a strategy for temporarily suspending critique that might otherwise dismiss it. When Dunye deploys her feminist camp gaze to talk back to mammy, for example, Cheryl is funny, she is "too much" as she parodies mammy. This is how she establishes a trust with the audience, as if to say, "I know, I know, mammy is bad, she's a victim of white Hollywood, so ridiculous and so obviously racist, why should we care about mammy…except look, she's kind of pretty, and dare I say, kind of sexy!?!" While Cheryl's co-worker friend and fellow black lesbian in the film doesn't want anything to do it, proclaiming "I can barely stand the stuff that Hollywood puts out now, let alone that n---- mammy shit from the 30s" Cheryl challenges the audience to look at mammy another way and rethink what mammy might mean for black women's visibility and possibilities for black lesbian camp spectatorship and black lesbian history.

Feminist Camp Spectatorship in The Dunyementary

Cheryl Dunye's unique style, referred to as The Dunyementary, is a self-reflexive tool that blends narrative and documentary and blurs the lines between subject and object. Dunye uses narrative interruptions like direct address to the camera, split frames, photographs and video clips to jolt the spectator out of the narrative. These narrative disruptions also provide supplementary information for the viewer like character backstory, context clues, and intentionality on the part of the filmmaker and actors. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey dissects Classic Hollywood cinema and renders it effectively "bad" for women.[25] Mulvey did not leave women movie

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[25] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 1975.

lovers hanging though, as she proposed an alternative that could offer women representation outside of the objectification and fetishization of Hollywood: avant-garde/experimental film. Dunye does this with the Dunyementary. In the same essay, Mulvey declares, “it is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it.” I want to suggest that Dunye’s hyper-analytical, self-reflexive style of storytelling does not destroy viewing pleasure, but rather creates a new kind of pleasure for the spectator that comes from being let in on Dunye’s process.

To be clear, Dunye’s Dunyementary is not a fixed genre that functions the same way in every film. Dunye modifies and adjusts the way in which she uses her Dunyementary techniques to shift the spectator’s access to camp in her films. In her early work, including *The Watermelon Woman*, the Dunyementary functions as a primer in camp spectatorship, making the camp process transparent and accessible, and thereby facilitating the camp readings through Cheryl’s character. In *The OWLS*, however, the same Dunyementary techniques resist camp because it unpacks too much, leaving little room for irony, parody, or performance. In some ways, though, *The OWLS* is an example of unintentional camp, as it is at times quite funny how seriously the characters and the film is take themselves. *The OWLS* does not offer the viewer the camp cues (music, parody, performances, playful dialogue) or guilty pleasures (taboos, queer desires, “bad feminism”) that we get in *The Watermelon Woman* and *Mommy Is Coming*. Whereas in *The Watermelon Woman* and *Mommy Is Coming*, Dunye appears as a character (a version of her real-life self) in the film as camp spectator with whom we can identify, Dunye’s character in *The OWLS* is not a camp spectator but a “serious feminist” and melancholic lesbian. The differences between Dunye’s “serious feminist” in *The OWLS* and other

films with serious lesbian/feminists like Bruce LaBruce's *The Misandrists* or Jamie Babbit's *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* have to do with tone, irony, playfulness, and pleasure. LaBruce and Babbit's films are tonally campy—playful and punny. They are set in worlds where there are relatively few consequences for their actions. The stakes are low but the conflict is exaggerated. LaBruce and Babbit's serious lesbian/feminists are excessive and ironic, they are desiring subjects and desired objects. Alternatively, the lesbian/feminists in *The OWLS* lack the kind of irony and playfulness that we see in the other films. In *The OWLS* we get direct addresses from all of the characters (the actors "playing the part") as well as from the actors (as themselves) constantly throughout the film where they analyze, self-reflect on, and unpack what it happening on screen. They are too close for camp. They lack the critical distance.

From the onset, *The Watermelon Woman* plays with spectator/object and situates Cheryl as a spectator within the film. The opening scene with Cheryl and Tamera videotaping a white wedding situates Cheryl as both subject and object and sets the stage for the rest of the film. From the perspective of the video camera we see a white family gathered for a wedding reception and posing for pictures. We can hear Cheryl's voice off-screen directing the family members and telling them where to stand as Tamera (also off-screen) repositions the camera. At one point we see Cheryl step into the frame to give further direction and put people into position, at which point she temporarily shifts from being an active subject of the gaze to an object of the gaze on screen.

After the wedding, Cheryl drives down the streets of Philadelphia while Tamera records out the window. Cheryl tells Tamera that the people at the wedding do not want to see any of this stuff in their wedding video, to which Tamera replies that they are

paying her and this is “her impression” of their wedding. Cheryl asks what Tamera is shooting out the window and Tamera says that it is “the really good stuff, urban, poverty, very raw, it’s very “in” right now.” Tamera’s comment facetiously alludes to the types of black visibility common in mainstream (white) representations of black people. Tamera and Cheryl bicker as Tamera defends her “urban realism” and Cheryl defends her film project on “The Watermelon Woman.” The scene cuts as Cheryl says “turn the camera off, I don’t want this stuff to be on film.” Here we get another reminder not only that Cheryl (the character and Dunye the filmmaker) are in control of what we get to see on screen, but that Dunye is strategically choosing what gets to stay and what gets cut.

The next scene is the first of Cheryl’s several direct addresses to the camera in the film. This is our first introduction to mammy camp in the film and our introduction to Cheryl as a camp spectator. Cheryl tells us that she is trying to figure out her next film project and that she knows it will be about black women because “our stories have never been told.” She says that she has been watching Old Hollywood movies with black actresses in them for research. One film in particular, *Plantation Memories*, stands out because it has a beautiful black mammy character. Cheryl puts the tape into the VHS player and tells us to look at it with her. What follows is a film clip where the young beautiful mammy reassures her white lady that “Master Charles” will return home safely and that everything will be ok. After the clip, Cheryl gives us her reading of the scene—*a camp reading* of the mammy actress. While Hollywood deemed the mammy so insignificant that they only credited her as “The Watermelon Woman,” Dunye sees mammy differently. She rolls her eyes when she tries to make sense of the ridiculous way in which the film credited her. Cheryl’s reading is against the grain of the mainstream

notion of mammy, insisting, “girlfriend has it goin’ on!” Cheryl points out, “something in her face, something in the way she looks and moves is serious, [that] is interesting.” This moment is the first of several moments where Dunye lets the viewer in on the process of camp spectatorship.

Another one of Cheryl’s camp readings is in another direct address to the camera, after she visits the house of a black gay man who is a film connoisseur with a huge collection of memorabilia from old black-cast films from the first half of the twentieth century. Cheryl sits in front of the camera next to her television as she parodies the old movie scene with the mammy we saw earlier in the film. Cheryl now has a bandana wrapped around her head, as does the mammy in the film, and gestures with her hands while she lip syncs mammy’s lines. Cheryl’s eyes shift throughout her theatrical performance, dramatically closing then opening as she looks off-camera, and occasionally making direct eye contact with us (the camera). At one moment, Cheryl mockingly wipes fake tears from under her eyes, rips off the bandana, fakes a nose blow into the bandana, and then continues her parody as she wipes her eyes with the bandana and mimics a goofy mammy smile.

This scene is notably different from the earlier scene where Cheryl first saw us the same clip from the film in that it redirects our attention to Cheryl. In the earlier scene, we see the mammy scene in full frame, yet here we only see the edge of mammy in the frame of the television screen. Instead of centering *Plantation Memories*, Dunye positions Cheryl and mammy so that they share the screen. Notably, the white woman/slave owner is pushed outside the frame, indicating a re-centering of mammy’s presence that is typically treated as supplementary in Hollywood. Cheryl’s parodic performance of the

scene is undeniably campy. She exaggerates mammy's facial expressions, smile, and gestures. When she rips the bandana off of her head and uses it to blow her nose and wipe her tears, Cheryl exposes her shaved, short hair (also a political statement) and mockingly cries over the white lady/slave owner's distress.

Later in the film, after Cheryl gets access to old pictures of Fae from a butch stud who used to go to Fae's live shows, Cheryl addresses us, wearing that same green bandana tied around her neck, as she sits in front of a collage of old photographs of black actresses, some of which presumably include Fae. It is at this point that Cheryl tells us Fae must have been a "Sapphic sister." Previously, Cheryl was fascinated by Fae because "girlfriend has it goin' on!," hinting at Fae's sexual appeal and Cheryl's attraction to her. Now, with the discovery that Fae is not only desirable (an object of desire), but also a desiring subject who was attracted to women like Cheryl, we see that Cheryl's camp spectatorship is not just a "reconstructive gaze" or a reimagining of the past, but rather that Cheryl's lesbian camp gaze is attuned to "truths" that might otherwise go unnoticed by a "normal" spectator.

While *The Watermelon Woman* uses the Dunyementary to facilitate a camp spectatorship vis-à-vis Cheryl, *The OWLS* uses the same techniques to resist a camp reading. At first glance, the premise of *The OWLS* is quite campy. As mentioned earlier, the film is a lesbian neo-noir film full of characters who take themselves seriously—a bit "too seriously." The film follows four middle-age lesbians who comprise two couples that are both falling apart as they deal with the aftermath of the death of a younger lesbian at their pool party. As the four women each deal with the younger 20-something lesbian's death in their own way (mostly different versions of avoidance and denial), a

younger 20-something black genderqueer and hypermasculine lesbian walks into the picture hiding the secret that she is the dead girl's partner and has come for revenge. Dunye plays Carol, one of the four lesbians and explains the significance behind the film's title during a direct address in the middle of the film. The film's title is an acronym for "Older Wiser Lesbians" and also a metaphor for the dynamics within the film. She explains to us (in a direct address to the camera) that owls are not kind birds but can be rather vicious and turn on each other, which we see happen between the women in the film (although in the interviews at the end of the film the cast and crew project a spirit of camaraderie). The film begins with a slide show of bygone eras in feminist and lesbian history set to riot grrrl music. We see video clips of the riot grrrl scene and lesbian punk culture of the 1990s before shifting to clips of AIDS activism, including ACT UP protests and marches. Immediately following this slideshow is the first of many direct addresses to the camera by the films' characters and actresses.

Katrin Horn describes camp as a "detached attachment" that creates a "distancing proximity" between women and mass culture that allows for them to derive pleasure from mass culture while also acknowledging its limitations.[26] Although Horn is talking about women's relationship to mass culture, the notion of a distancing proximity is useful for thinking about the Dunyementary and how it offers a "distancing proximity" that camps the viewing experience. In *The OWLS*, we get constant direct addresses to the camera from the characters and the actors. Sometimes they are speaking as their character, while other times they are speaking as themselves. Usually this is clear but sometimes it isn't

[26] Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*, 2017.

obvious right away. The narrative is decentered with no singular protagonist. Rather, the story is told from everyone's perspective, and they all have different perspectives. Guin Turner's character Iris is set up as a classic camp character like Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* or Faye Dunaway as Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest*.[27] Iris is narcissistic, full of herself, and excessive. She says too much, she flirts too much, she does drugs too much, she drinks too much, and she thinks too much of herself. We learn that what she wants most is to get the fame she feels she is owed when she tells us this via a direct address to the camera. Later, Guin Turner (speaking as herself, the actress) tells us that she identifies with Iris, but only to an extent. She explains that she and Iris have the same mannerisms and talk the same way, but that this only is because Turner decided to play her character that way (like herself). However, Turner also says that she is not like Iris because she (Turner) isn't living in the past, in denial, and believes she is more likable in real life than Iris is in the film. Without the Dunyementary narrative interruptions and character/actress interviews that give us Iris/Turner's Dunyementary-style direct addresses to the camera, we would be left with Turner's acting, playing Iris as an excessive character. Moments in the film like Iris's over-the-top tantrums and public declarations of her self-importance could be easily read as campy. However, what the direct address gives us is more depth and a degree of self-reflexivity to the character and an attachment to the process of Turner's identification with, but ultimate detachment to, Iris. We are too close to Turner, who is simultaneously too attached and too detached from her character Iris (she *is* Iris but also she doesn't *identify* with Iris) to read her as

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[27] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996.

camp. In *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl never walked us through her mammy performances or how she directed the actress who played Fae when she performed in the old movie scenes. Cheryl functioned as the "straight woman" in the film (no pun intended) who travelled through a world of campy characters. There is something about the transparency in *The OWLS*, facilitated by the Dunyementary, that denies us the access to camp spectatorship.

Mammy as Camp

The Watermelon Woman stages a debate about images. Is mammy good because she created roles and visibility for black women in Hollywood when there otherwise wasn't any, or is she bad because she perpetuated racist stereotypes whose legacy continues to oppress black women? Is Fae Richards a good or bad black lesbian icon? Is Cheryl a good black lesbian character? As Karin Wimbley notes, Dunye (and Cheryl) reappropriate the mammy and Fae Richards for black lesbian history, effectively turning a "negative" image into a productive one for black lesbian visibility. I want to point out that Dunye does not argue for mammy as a "positive" image, but delves into the way in which mammy (vis-à-vis Dunye's creation of Fae Richards, "The Watermelon Woman") reflects one of her "guilty pleasures." Similarly, when Robertson talks about camp's "guilty pleasures" (which are also her guilty pleasures), she explains that by looking at the complexity and contradictions of these pleasures we can move beyond their "two-sidedness." Robertson invokes Judith Mayne's work on spectatorship to acknowledge how exploring the complexities of camp open up new possibilities of understanding. Robertson writes, "We can begin to move beyond this debate to explore what Mayne

points to as 'the far more difficult task of questioning what is served by the continued insistence upon this either/or, and more radically, of examining what it is in conceptions of spectators' responses and film texts that produces this ambiguity in the first place.'"[28] Dunye uses camp to explore her ambiguous relationship to mammy and to reimagine mammy as a camp object that she simultaneously resists and enjoys.

Dunye camps Mammy in *The Watermelon Woman* with both the reimagined scenes of Hollywood mammy films that we view from Cheryl's television, as well as with Cheryl's parodic performances. Terri Francis's articulations of "scary subjects" and "scary spectators" are useful for thinking about how black female spectatorship, as we see in *The Watermelon Woman* can pose a "problem" for film theory, not because black women themselves are the problem, but because their "scary" subjectivity undermines a representational system in which they are only ever supposed to be invisible, fetishized, or passive.[29] Francis describes "scary subjects" or "scary spectators" as active agents who unmask and self-reflect on stereotypes rather than being contained by them. Francis envisions black feminist film theory emphasizing the "give-and-take" between images and viewers, exploring the unpredictability and variation in black female spectator responses (identification, disidentification, etc.), moving toward examining hierarchical systems of oppression that influence spectatorship and away from an evaluation of images as "good" or "bad."

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[28] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 17.
[29] Terri Francis, "'She Will Never Look': Film Spectatorship, Black Feminism, and Scary Subjectivities," in *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*. Ed. Vicki Callahan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 98-126. Francis evokes Kathleen Rowe's notion of the "unruly woman" here.

Black feminist scholars have long been unraveling and destabilizing the stereotypes of black women that have long controlled their representation in the mainstream. As noted earlier, bell hooks uses the phrase "absent presence" to describe how black women have been "visible" but effectively unrepresented in Hollywood, with their only purpose to be the "Other" and build up white womanhood as the object of the male gaze.[30] Images of black women have also been overwhelmingly "negative," stereotypical, one-dimensional, and offensive, and yet many black women, including hooks herself, love the movies and derive pleasure from them. How does this happen? This is where hooks builds upon and expands Manthia Diawara's notion of "resisting spectatorship"[31] to argue that black female spectators develop an "oppositional" relationship to cinema that involves critically engaging with the images on screen by looking back, looking critically, not taking representations at face value, exerting agency by actively looking and not passively consuming, interrogating the images and their messages, looking when you're "not supposed" to look.[32]

Emphasizing the active process of spectatorship as a reimagining and community building effort, Jacqueline Stewart uses the phrase "reconstructive spectatorship" to describe an active process of fluidity, negotiation, heterogeneity, and layering that recognizes the potential pleasures a spectator may experience by allowing

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[30] bell hooks, *Reel to Real*, 1996.
[31] Manthia Diawara, *Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance*," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Braudy and Cohen, 2009.
[32] James Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) and Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* both exemplify this.

oneself to get lost in the images on screen.[33] She asserts that African Americans carved "literal and symbolic" spaces for black spectatorship by reconstructing their individual and collective identities "in response to the classical system's moves toward narrative integration and in the wake of migration's fragmenting effects."[34] Reaching beyond the confines of the "positive images debate," Stewart explores how cinematic representations of African Americans, despite being overwhelmingly crude, stereotypical, and regressive, contributed to black urbanization and modernization, and how the cinema offered a space where recently migrated African Americans were not passive consumers but agents and active subjects who engaged *with* the images on screen.[35]

Cheryl's engagement with mammy takes different forms, alluding to the different ways in which camp spectators engage with camp objects. In the beginning, Cheryl resists the "normative" view of mammy, refusing to take her at face value. Then, Cheryl parodies mammy, performing mammy in a way that exaggerates her excessive attachment to her white mistress. Dunye blurs the lines between camp subject and object when she, as Cheryl, transforms herself into mammy. Dunye is the camp subject who is creating camp (the fabricated story of Fae Richards) as a result of reading the mammy as a camp object. In this way, Dunye engages with what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as "disidentification"—a strategy for identity formation as well as a survival strategy used

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[33] Jacqueline Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves?: Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," 2003. Also discussed in Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 2005.
[34] Stewart, 2003, 653.
[35] Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*, 2005.

by people of color and queer people to interact with mainstream images that is not assimilating or rejecting but somewhere in-between.

As mentioned earlier, Karin Wimbley describes Cheryl's parody of mammy as a form of what she refers to as "stereotypy." She explains that stereotypy is a type of parody used by African Americans as a way to reappropriate stereotypes and provide a critical critique of the past.[36] Dunye's use of stereotypy, Wimbley argues, links her to womanist traditions and representational strategies, particularly "a womanist traditions that employ the mammy stereotype to reconstruct and recuperate black womanhood from the pervasiveness of the racial stereotype." She also observes that there is a "disconnect" between Cheryl and her mother (played by Dunye's real mother) in the film that is an "ironic play on [Alice] Walker's womanist philosophies."[37] Alice Walker talks about the ways in which information and stories get passed on to different generations in a top-down manner, from mother to daughter. Yet, as Wimbley notes, Cheryl and her mother seem to have "communication problems." Cheryl's mother has stories to share, although a lot of information she cannot remember, to Cheryl's dismay. The stories that her mother does remember are filtered through her perspective that views people like Cheryl (lesbians) as "weird" and "strange." While still offering valuable information, Edith Irene's stories, like the "master" historical narrative, seem to already filter out identities like Cheryl's. Cheryl has no choice but to "camp" these stories, the history, and the representation. Many camp scholars describe camp as a "survival strategy." Cheryl uses it for this very purpose, with visibility functioning as a form of survival. Wimbley calls

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[36] Karin Wimbley, "Stereotypy," 144.
[37] Ibid.

Dunye a "master parodist" for the way in which she recovers and reappropriates the Mammy stereotype for black lesbian representation. Wimbley calls Dunye "a master parodist" that stereotypy is "a means to recuperate negative images of black women in the American cinematic tradition by utilizing the black womanist recovery project" and positioning the stereotype as "site for recovery."[38]

Dunye's Lesbian Camp Gaze

Lesbian film studies has long been concerned with the issue of the gaze, the representation of female same-sex desire, and the extent to which a film does or does not cater to a lesbian spectator vis-à-vis a lesbian gaze. While many films discussed by lesbian film scholarship are "lesbian by interpretation" (often the result of a camp reading of the text), Dunye's films are explicitly and unapologetically about lesbians, for lesbians, and made by a lesbian. Examples of "lesbian by interpretation" include Mrs. Danvers the housekeeper in Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 *Rebecca* and Miss Harper the sadistic prison matron in *Caged* (1950).[39] Most of Dunye's films feature romance storylines or seductions that lead to explicit sex scenes between two women. Thus, the films deploy a "lesbian gaze" that challenges the traditional male gaze structure. Dunye's

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[38] Ibid.
[39] See Patricia White's *Uninvited*, 1999. and Benshoff and Griffin's *Queer Images*, 2005, for more examples and further discussion of lesbian and gay coded characters in early and Classical Hollywood.

films look at lesbians from a lesbian perspective. Yet the films also offer another way of looking at lesbians, from a camp perspective that creates space for a lesbian disidentification with aspects of lesbian culture.

The lesbian camp gaze offers opportunities for more kinds of female same-sex desire and visual pleasures. The lesbian gaze structure as it unfolds on-screen in film involves an exchange of looks between two women, two active desiring subjects. The lesbian gaze disrupts the male gaze because it involves an exchange of looks between women and allows for an active desiring female subjectivity.[40] As Karen Hollinger explains, "the lesbian look challenges the exclusive male prerogative to control the filmic gaze and reconfigures this gaze so that it reflects a new female relation to desire."[41] We see various examples of this notion of the lesbian gaze in Dunye's work, but Dunye also expands the lesbian gaze beyond this definition. For example, in *The Watermelon Woman*, when Cheryl and Diana first meet at the video store where Cheryl works, we see a lesbian gaze structure when Diana stands at the counter and Cheryl on the other side of the counter next to her male boss as he awkwardly flirts with Diana and sets her up with an account at the store. Dunye's lesbian camp gaze reaches beyond the look/reverse look-structure of equal exchange between two women on screen that some lesbian film theorists describe and shows how Dunye herself is an active lesbian spectator.[42] This

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[40] Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Hollinger also engages with Chris Straayer's discussions of the lesbian gaze. Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
[41] Karen Hollinger, *Feminist Film Studies* (Routledge, 2012), 134.
[42] Hollinger, 1998; Straayer, 1996. Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

active lesbian spectator position entails the recognition of coded "lesbianisms" in otherwise non-explicitly lesbian images. In her work on lesbian representability in Classical Hollywood cinema and lesbian spectatorship, Patricia White describes lesbian and gay readings of "dominant" Hollywood films as

> [N]ot simply a decoding process, the revelation of queer subject matter, the restoration of coherence and meaning. Rather it is an encoding process, a textual re-vision with the reader-critic as subject of its fantasy, as [Teresa] de Lauretis's account of spectatorship in Chapter 3 of *The Practice of Love* suggests.[43]

This reader-critic that White describes takes the form of the feminist camp spectator in Dunye's work. White adds to this when she describes the lesbian figure's visibility in Hollywood as paradoxical. She argues, "it is not the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of Woman, but the 'always-hanging-around-ness' of the spectator." Cheryl in the *The Watermelon Woman* is just that kind of spectator. She "hangs around" Fae, watching her old movies and obsessively researching her even while others remain disinterested—they don't "see" what Cheryl sees in Fae. Notably, though, it is not just straight people who do not see Fae like Cheryl does; it is also Tamera and Diana, the other lesbians in the film.

Dunye also alludes to "blind spots" in the lesbian community and complicates the notion of a coded lesbian visibility and lesbian spectatorship with the characters Cricket and Skye in *The Owls.* Cricket (the dead girl) tells us in a direct address to the camera that she's "been hiding from everyone in plain sight all her life." Later she faces the camera while speaking to an off-screen interviewer (possibly Dunye but we cannot tell) and insists "I don't hide my identity." The interviewer follows up, asking "So what do

[43] Patricia White, 1999, 205.

you hide?" to which she replies, "*I* don't hide, I am hidden." Here, Dunye exposes some of the tensions between lesbian visibility and mainstream culture as well as lesbian generational differences and the types of invisibility or dismissal that occur within lesbian culture.

Dunye complicates the lesbian gaze in her films by playing with desiring subjectivity and the object of desire. At times, Dunye offers a "classic" lesbian gaze structure, with an exchange of looks and reciprocal desiring subjects/objects (both women want each other). Perhaps more interesting, though, is when the lesbian gaze is not reciprocated. At times, lesbian film studies seems to suggest that lesbians always desire each other on screen. Of course, that is not always the case. Dunye challenges assumptions about lesbian desiring subjects and lesbian desirability by playing with camp strategies—through parody, irony, and visual style that interrupts our access to pleasure vis-à-vis the gaze. For example, when Cheryl goes to a bar for a double date with her friend and co-worker Tamera, Cheryl's date Yvette sings the classic song "Lovin' You" by Minnie Riperton. Yvette takes her performance very seriously, hitting high notes her voice is not equipped to do. Yvette stares seductively at Cheryl from the stage as she sings, but Cheryl tries to avoid eye contact, resisting a lesbian gaze. What is intended to be a seduction, with Yvette trying to impress Cheryl with the song, turns into a camp performance—unintentional on Yvette's part (a failed seriousness). Cheryl already feels pressure to like Yvette because Tamera and others insist that Yvette is cute, a catch, but it is precisely Yvette's excessiveness and camp that turns Cheryl off. This failed seduction is a stark contrast to Cheryl's first meeting with Diana, a white lesbian who is new to town. Cheryl and Diana first meet when Diana stops by the video store where Cheryl

works. Cheryl and Diana flirt over movies, but it is clear that the way they see them is different when Diana initially challenges Cheryl's movie recommendations and they playfully argue about lesbian representation. Diana ultimately decides to rent some of the movies Cheryl recommended and in an awkward interaction at the check-out desk, we see an exchange of looks between Cheryl and Diana that signal reciprocating desire. The first time Cheryl and Diana have sex it is in Diana's loft apartment in front of a television screen playing a scene from what looks like an old Hollywood mammy movie (but it is not actually the real thing, it is a parody of a scene from *Imitation of Life*, one of the films Dunye "recreated" for the film). Cheryl's relationship with Diana begins to parallel the research she finds on Fae ("The Watermelon Woman"), who also dated white women. Eventually, Cheryl breaks it off with Diana after a series of awkward dates and conversations about race but it is ultimately Diana's refusal to understand what "The Watermelon Woman" means to Cheryl that seems to be the breaking point. Cheryl's "camp" relationship to "The Watermelon Woman" seems to be more reciprocal and weighs more powerful than her romantic relationship with Diana. What I want to point out here is that Cheryl's lesbian camp gaze offers her access to a different kind of pleasure than the classic lesbian gaze. Dunye plays with the notion that two women looking at each other in a lesbian film automatically signals desire (same lesbian gaze structure—between Cheryl and Yvette and between Cheryl and Diana). But Cheryl does not desire Yvette. In fact, Cheryl tries to look away during Yvette's seduction song. With Diana, Cheryl initially looks at her and desires her, although the film emphasizes that their connection is tied more to Cheryl's curiosity and bond with Diana over movies rather than a sexual attraction. Ironically, it is Cheryl's lesbian camp gaze with The

Watermelon Woman/Fae Richards that catapults her sexual interest in Diana and the lesbian gaze between her and Cheryl.

From Mammy to Mommy

Mammy is a “bad object” for black feminism. However, through a camp re-reading of Mammy, Dunye reclaims Mammy as a “productive” image for black lesbian identity and history. Dunye does this by employing her feminist camp gaze, which is informed by her feminist camp spectatorship, to perform parodies of mammy. “Mommy,” on the other hand, does not need to be reappropriated because, unlike Mammy, she is not a stereotype or controlling image. Dunye’s films have never shied away from exploring complicated, controversial topics. In *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye (as Cheryl in the film) dared to desire Mammy and *Mommy Is Coming* she dares to fuck (literally) Mommy.

In *Mommy Is Coming*, Mommy (both the mother figure in general and the mother character in the film) functions as the linchpin for sexual liberation. She is part of the classic incest sex taboo (having sex with your mother). The word “motherfucker” is ironically one of the worst insults (“motherfucker”) and a compliment of sorts, indicating strength, toughness, and power (“strong as a motherfucker”). The film’s title, *Mommy Is Coming* is itself a campy play on words, as Helen/mommy in the film literally “comes” to Berlin to visit Dylan (her daughter) and also “cums” when she orgasms during sex (also with her daughter). For both Dylan and Claudia, sex with Helen is liberating. It helps Claudia explore her gender fluidity as “Claude,” and it helps Dylan learn how to love Claudia. Dylan’s lesson is less clear from the actual scene and more implied from the

following scene wherein she tells Claudia that she loves her and they run off together as a happy couple.

Dunye co-wrote with lesbian literary legend Sarah Schulman (who also appeared as the "CLIT archivist" in *The Watermelon Woman* in the scene alluding to the Lesbian Herstory Archives and with whom Dunye co-wrote the script for *The Owls*), is Dunye's first and only pornographic film. Set in Berlin's queer lesbian sex scene, the film blends elements of romantic comedy and pornography and features a cast brought together by renowned sex-positive feminist pornographer and sex educator Annie Sprinkle.[44] The cast includes sex workers, porn stars, and sex experts who are familiar faces in the Berlin/German porn world and some also in the larger feminist porn scene, such as Jiz Lee, Papi Coxx/Ignacio Rivera, Maggie Tapert, and Wieland Speck.

From the opening credits and first scene, the film presents itself as a farcical sex comedy. Set in present-day Berlin, the film follows Claudia, a queer, masculine-presenting, racially ambiguous woman who wants a monogamous relationship with her polyamorous white femme girlfriend, Dylan. Dylan is frustrated because she finds sex with Claudia "boring" and has issues with love. Claudia and Dylan keep having the same argument: Dylan wants to top Claudia during anal sex but Claudia refuses, saying that she doesn't trust Dylan and isn't ready to "give up control." Meanwhile, Dylan's mom (Helen) enters the picture when she decides to visit Dylan to temporarily escape her boring life and cheating husband. Helen wants to have a sexy affair with a hot guy in

[44] David D'Arcy, "Mommy Is Coming," *Screen Daily*, February 15, 2012, https://www.screendaily.com/mommy-is-coming/5038192.article

Berlin. Dylan and Helen (and pretty much everyone else in the film) are white. Cheryl Dunye appears in several scenes as an unnamed taxicab driver and a spectator and unintentional voyeur who happens to be in situations where she sees the characters having sex (while driving her cab and in the Axel hotel). The film creates a love/sex triangle between Claudia/Claude, the girlfriend, and her mother that engages with sexual taboos as well as feminist taboos—using the tools of camp to challenge and complicate feminist ideas about consent, pleasure, and liberation from a queer-feminist-sex-positive perspective.

Notably, the film is overwhelmingly and uncharacteristically "white" compared to Dunye's other work. This might say more about the Berlin queer and BDSM sex scene and feminist porn industry than Dunye herself since Dunye talks about intentionally trying to cast actors who are already in these networks and spaces. Claudia and Dunye, along with porn star Jiz Lee who also appears in several scenes, are the only people of color in the film. Surprisingly, Dunye shies away from any direct engagement with or critical exploration of race in the film. Issues like interracial lesbian relationships (which is a common theme in her other films), the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in pornography, and racial politics in queer sex-positive culture or even in Berlin are pushed under the rug in favor of exploring themes related to gender fluidity and sexual pleasure.

Although the film offers a lot to unpack, *Mommy Is Coming* has received very little scholarly attention. One exception is feminist scholar Jennifer Moorman's 2014 dissertation, which briefly examines the film in the context of female pornographers and

"sexperimental" filmmakers.[45] Moorman's analysis of *Mommy Is Coming* focuses on Claudia/Claude's genderbending in the film and how the Dunyementary style blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. Moorman also notes that the film explores subjects such as incest, BDSM, and genderbending that tend to be quite common in porn films but are outside the scope of American hegemonic norms. Moorman also talks about the film's farcical tone and how this contributes to its casual treatment of typically serious topics, like incest. This scene is the focus of my analysis here (the incest scene).

The incest scene unfolds at the Axel hotel, where Claudia/Claude works and Helen is staying for the duration of her trip. At this point, Helen only knows Claudia/Claude as Claude and Dylan only knows her as Claudia. Claude has gone back to the hotel with Helen to have sex. Meanwhile, Dylan goes to the hotel because she wants to have makeup sex with Claudia (they broke up at the beginning of the film). Dylan also wants to tell Claudia that she loves her (which Dylan's never been able to say before). Inevitably, Claudia runs into Dylan and, trying to avoid having to explain herself in an awkward encounter with Dylan and Helen at the same time, brings Dylan to another hotel room so that Claudia can tend to Helen, who is waiting blindfolded in the other room. Comical burlesque music plays while we watch Claudia/Claude fumble while trying to put on a harness and dildo so she can have sex with Helen. As Claudia/Claude (wearing only the harness and dildo) walks in the hallway en route to Helen's room, the camera disorients us with exaggerated angles and shaky camera movement. When Claudia goes back to check on Dylan in the other hotel room, Dylan is already naked. Dylan grabs

[45] Jennifer Moorman, *Women on Top: The Work of Female Pornographers and "Sexperimental" Filmmakers*, PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2014.

Claudia's crotch and unzips her pants while Claudia resists and pleads "no." As Claudia struggles to leave, Dylan pulls the harness and dildo off of Claudia and puts it on herself. After Claudia leaves, Dylan scurries after her into the hallway, naked except for the strap-on. We see that Helen is patiently but eagerly waiting in the other hotel room for Claude to return. The lighting in Helen's room is now dark and red. This is the same dramatic lighting we saw earlier during the hardcore sex scenes at the local underground sex club.

Meanwhile, during all of this the story cuts to a conversation in the hotel lobby between Claudia's male co-worker and Dylan's sex partner friend (played by genderqueer porn star Jiz Lee), who is having an existential crisis about being bored with sex work and not sure what to do with her life. Dunye makes another appearance here as the cabbie. She wanders through the hotel, roaming the hallways looking for Dylan so she can give her back the purse that she left behind in Dunye's cab. Dunye is caught off guard when she sees Claudia and Dylan running around with the harness and dildo in the hallway. Here, Dunye is again a stand-in for the audience and the camp spectator. Like in the opening sex scene in her cab, Dunye is simultaneously curious, shocked, and also stimulated by what she sees.

Back to Dylan, Claudia/Claude, and Helen. At this point the hallway is pitch-black and Dylan can't see anything as she wanders searching for Claudia's room. Dylan fumbles around in the hallway, using her hands on the wall to guide her until she finds the room—except it's not Claudia's, it's Helen's. Once Dylan enters Helen's room, she feels around until she touches Helen's body (presuming it is Claudia's). Because of the dim lighting, Dylan isn't able to see that she has the wrong person. Dylan is figuratively and literally (color)blinded in this moment, unable to see that she is with Helen, who is

white, and not Claudia, who is brown. Claudia's vision, however, is quite clear as she is able to witness this scene unfold from the side of the hotel room. Just as Dylan begins to penetrate Helen from behind, Claudia appears in the background and panics. Claudia paces and even makes comical, exaggerated gestures with pleading prayer hands and a sign of the cross but ultimately she remains silent. The shots here are conventional porn shots but the playful music and Claudia's playful panicking makes the tone light-hearted. Close-ups of Dylan and Helen's faces combined with their moaning noises suggest that both are enjoying the sex. In a comedic climax, both Helen and Dylan scream "I love you!" at the same time as they orgasm. The subsequent revelation that Dylan had sex with her mother is played as comedy. Claudia approaches closer to the bed, Dylan turns around and shouts "Claudia!" This prompts Helen to remove her blindfold, turn around and shout "Claude! In this moment, Dylan shouts as she realizes the woman she had sex with was—"Mommy!" At this point, Dunye finds her way around the hotel and walks into the room, confused. She smiles nervously but playfully, still continuing to look instead of turning away. The scene ends there. The film cuts to black and the title card "Is this how our fairytale ends?" appears on screen. The final scene is at the train station, where a happily coupled Dylan and Claudia say goodbye to Helen. All three are playful and happy. Helen jokes that she won't tell Dylan's father about what happened. Dylan admits she loves Claudia and wants to be with her and it all feels like a playful happy ending.

Mommy Is Coming puts feminist and lesbian debates about sex, pleasure, and power into conversation with feminist porn studies. This conversation within feminist and lesbian politics about pornography has been going on for decades. The Feminist Sex

Wars, an ongoing debate between anti-pornography feminists and sex-positive feminists in the 1980s, brought discussions about sexuality, sexual practices, and sexual violence against women to the foreground of feminist politics.[46] Feminist pornography emerged as a facet of porn, growing in the 1980s and 1990s, and emphasizing a female gaze, with content by and for women that focused on female pleasure. However, feminists arguably began making porn earlier with some lesbian feminist experimental filmmakers such as Barbara Hammer making films that showcased lesbian sex, female nudity, sexual desire and pleasure. The label "feminist porn" started being used more frequently in the 2000s to describe a film's content and production.[47] Feminist porn refers to porn from a woman's point of view that caters to a female spectator and give her what she "likely wants to see."[48] It often explores the struggle to define and understand one's sexuality and has a clear feminist agenda such as sexual empowerment or sexual liberation. Furthermore, feminist porn is produced in a feminist environment, which typically refers to there being open communication on set, an emphasis on collaboration, and safe working conditions for the actors and the crew.

In a lot of ways, *Mommy Is Coming* is a typical feminist porn film—it explores all the common themes, it's made by a feminist lesbian for a feminist lesbian target audience. In an interview about *Mommy Is Coming*, Dunye even speaks to the collaborative production process and the environment on set, how she respected the

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[46] Lisa Duggan, *Sex Wars* (Routledge, 2014).
[47] Taormino, Parreñas Shimizu, Penley, Miller-Young, eds. *The Feminist Porn Book* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).
[48] Ibid.

actors and asked for their input on the script and on set.[49] Dunye remarks that she encounters a lot of people who claim to be sex-positive but, when it comes down to it, are actually closed-off to a lot of things in terms of sex and pleasure. Thus, she exclaims that this is why she wanted to make this film, as a provocation to test her own convictions and push her audience out of their comfort zone, pushing back against "the sanctity of the queer bedroom" and encouraging people to play and "come out from behind the curtains."[50] Dunye's use of camp, comedy, and Dunyementary style all help in putting her target audience—the feminist and lesbian communities—at ease. The camp combined with Dunye's reputation encourages viewers to suspend feminist critique. I opened this chapter by describing the opening scene in *Mommy Is Coming* to point out how Dunye uses camp to suspend the spectator's critique of what is unfolding on screen. However, I am curious what it might mean to employ that feminist critique, particularly in the titular last sex scene (the mother-fucking scene), where issues of consent get muddied and overlooked by celebrations of sexual liberation and pleasure that lead to the film's happy ending. I suggest that the film's camp works to shield the film's queer sexual politics and exploration of sexual liberation from feminist critique. To be clear, I am not talking about the kind of issues that anti-pornography feminists might have with the film, nor am I talking about the controversial issue of incest. Rather, I am interested in how sex-positive feminists, who advocate for an affirmative consent standard and consider consent to be the linchpin for "good" (feminist-approved) sex might read this scene.

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[49] Frameline, "Frameline36: Mommy Is Coming Interview, YouTube video, 7:06, July 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h-TXb9TgKU.
[50] Ibid.

The scene is clearly intended to be fun and campy and sex-positive. However, in trying to be subversive and edgy, the campiness might actually (unintentionally) work to normalize aspects of rape culture that sex-positive feminists work to undo. Watching the film amidst public debates about consent and feminist conversations about an affirmative consent standard, this scene seems problematic. It is not so much that Dylan is having sex with her mother. Rather, the problem is Dylan had sex with her mother, thinking it was Claudia, after Claudia had already repeatedly told Dylan "No."

In her essay on Spike Lee's 1986 film *She's Gotta Have It*, bell hooks challenges critics and audiences who celebrated the film's representation of black women's sexuality.[51] She takes particular issue with one of the sex scenes. In this scene, one of Nola Darling's sexual partners goes to Nola's apartment after she called him and invited him over. When he gets there he is upset to learn that this was not a booty call and proceeds to rape Nola, demanding "Whose Pussy Is This?!," to which she replies, "Yours." hooks calls out the film for how it portrayed this rape scene and for making it seem like Nola wanted it, deserved it, and blamed herself after it. hooks explains that this scene and its aftermath fed into rape culture. Furthermore, she notes the ways in which black independent cinema can be simultaneously transgressive and oppressive, and how *She's Gotta Have It* ultimately punishes the very thing it was allegedly trying to celebrate (black women's sexuality). I bring up hooks's essay to consider similar implications for camp film, queer cinema, feminist pornography, and ask whether *Mommy Is Coming* is different, and if so, why? Should we read the incest scene in the film as rape? As feminist

[51] bell hooks, "Whose Pussy Is This? A Feminist Comment," in *Reel to Real*, 1996.

spectators we are conditioned to read it that way, but as camp spectators we are conditioned to “go with” the playfulness and not take it at face value. I suggest that this scene poses a “problem” for both feminism and camp that reveals some of the ongoing tensions between the two.

Chapter Three: Feminist-Extra: Bruce LaBruce, the Shock Jock Feminist

Bruce LaBruce's work is typically associated with radical queer cinema, the queercore or homocore movement, and hardcore gay pornography more so than feminism or feminist filmmaking. LaBruce has, however, identified himself as a feminist in interviews. His work often reveals the tensions between queer and feminist politics, particularly when it comes to depictions of sex and violence. LaBruce's use of camp as a strategy for provocation is complicated given his target audience and fanbase. The primary people who consume and follow LaBruce's work, and LaBruce's target audience, are radical queers, experimental artists, anarchist punk artists and fans, hardcore pornographers and porn enthusiasts, revolutionaries, radical leftists, and others on the outskirts of mainstream politics, pop culture, and society. LaBruce camps it up to temporarily suspend our feminist critique and establish trust with his audience--"he knows what he's doing." LaBruce challenges feminist viewers to reflect on their feminist politics by thinking about what makes us laugh, what makes us cringe, and why we sometimes might feel the urge to look away from the screen. Always aiming to shock and provoke his audience, LaBruce wants us to think about what makes us uneasy when we watch his films.

In this chapter I explore the ways in which LaBruce uses camp to simultaneously shock viewers and suspend their critique. Unlike Anna Biller and Cheryl Dunye, who engage with feminism (feminist themes and characters) in the majority of their work, the majority of LaBruce's films explore themes related to gay male sexuality, sexual

subcultures, sexual taboos, and revolutionary and anarchist politics. Bruce LaBruce does, however, directly engage with feminism in his 2017 feature film *The Misandrists*, and he indirectly skirts around feminism in his earlier 2004 feature *The Raspberry Reich*, wherein he camps extremist revolutionary politics and leftist terrorist groups by following a woman-led terrorist group called "The Homosexual Intifada." I focus more on *The Misandrists* because it deals more directly with feminism, whereas *The Raspberry Reich* is about revolutionary politics more broadly. I argue that these films use camp as an interruption—to reorient the spectator toward different ways of seeing sex, gender, and feminism. The campiness, in addition to LaBruce's reputation as a shock jock and filmmaker provocateur, encourages the feminist camp spectator to temporarily suspend critique (at face value LaBruce's work can look rather "anti-feminist"). His work also uses camp for comedy. Editing strategies and character dialogue make the disruption of conventional visual pleasures humorous—and create new modes of pleasure.

Born in 1964, LaBruce grew up relatively isolated on a farm in rural Ontario, Canada. In one interview he describes the violence on the farm, which he refers to as the "cruel farm," where he frequently witnessed the slaughtering and castration of animals.[1] He studied film at York University in Toronto and became heavily involved in the emerging queercore scene there in the 1980s. During this time, LaBruce co-founded and ran a queer punk zine called *J.D.s* with fellow artist G.B. Jones, a woman active in the queercore movement. LaBruce began shooting short films on Super 8 film and made

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[1] "Reluctant Pornographer: An Interview with Bruce LaBruce," *Autre*, April 3, 2015, https://autre.love/interviewsmain/2015/4/3/reluctant-pornographer-an-interview-with-bruce-labruce

videos, which he often acted in and which were often sexually explicit and explored sexual taboos. His first feature film, *No Skin Off My Ass* (1991) features explicit sex scenes, starring LaBruce as a gay punk hairdresser who falls in love with a Neo-Nazi skinhead. He has since produced numerous films and worked in other mediums like photography, art installation, theatre, zines, and written essays. His personal website features an Adult Content Warning and offers a sampling of his work and information about his accolades and collaborations. LaBruce's story about how he got his name suggests a camp humor and a camping of his original last name, the plain and simple and common "Bruce." LaBruce explains,

> My real last name is Bruce and I was born in Bruce Township, which is in Bruce County, and I worked at the Bruce Nuclear Power Development Station as a summer student, and it's on the Bruce Peninsula and it's near the Bruce trail…so, in other words, it's all about Bruce, you know? It's Scottish—I'm almost directly descended from Robert the Bruce, the kind of Scotland—it's obvious that the Scottish lineage is really strong. My friend Kathleen Maitland Carter—when we started going to university she started calling me LaBruce, because I was always acting grand.[2]

LaBruce's name itself, and the story around it, reflects his camp sensibility.

LaBruce's own perspective on camp reflects a narrower view of camp that, like much of the early scholarship, insists that camp is a queer practice, queer sensibility, and argues that its work is (and should be) political and transgressive. To be clear, LaBruce is not so much concerned with camp remaining the "property" of queers as he is troubled by the fact that a lot of contemporary camp doesn't challenge the status quo and seems to be moving away from its subversive roots by catering to mainstream audiences and

[2] Ibid.

conforming to mainstream norms. In 2012 LaBruce presented an essay (now available on his website) about camp at the Camp/Anti-Camp Conference in Berlin. Referring to it as a "manifesto," in his essay LaBruce critiques examples of this mainstream camp (which he ultimately argues are "anti-camp") and calls for re-radicalization of camp, emphasizing camp's political agenda and original function as a tool of subversion.[3] The online version of the essay is prefaced by the note that "the presentation of the paper was itself intended to be somewhat camp, both in the outdated academic style of the writing and in its mode of performance."[4] It explains that, for the presentation, LaBruce dressed in formal attire and used a chalkboard to write out his extensive lists of different kinds of camp. Acknowledging the camp spectator, the preface also adds that, "Whether or not the actual content of the paper was or is designed to be camp is entirely up to the reader to decide."

As noted in the Introduction chapter, many camp scholars try to define camp by describing it. Definitions of camp seemingly always happen in a roundabout way. LaBruce plays with this, starting his essay off by listing different categories of camp such as "Classic Gay Camp," "Bad Gay Camp," Good Straight Camp," "Bad Ultra Camp," "Reactionary Camp," and "Liberal Camp," among others. The classifications are both excessive and telling. LaBruce groups Sarah Palin, Ann Coulter, and Kirk Cameron together under "Conservative Camp." Under "Bad Straight Camp" he lists *Twilight*, Che Guevara, *Tropic Thunder*, Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Tyler

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[3] Bruce LaBruce, "Notes on Camp/Anti Camp," http://brucelabruce.com/2015/07/07/notes-on-camp-anti-camp/
[4] Ibid.

Perry, Eddie Murphy, and Heavy Metal get lumped together under "Reactionary Camp." Before launching into any analysis or critique, LaBruce's naming of these lists captures his point that no one definition sufficiently contains all of these examples. In doing this, he challenges the expanded definition of camp and its recent explosion in the mainstream and pop culture, having been appropriated and diluted for the masses.

LaBruce takes issue with many different facets of camp--which he suggests should actually be called "anti-camp," particularly those most visible in the mainstream and popular culture, because they often work, under the false pretense of "camp," to support hegemonic norms and conventional narratives rather than challenging or transgressing them. I agree with LaBruce's observation that camp is now part of popular culture and no longer a sensibility and politics shared by a marginalized group of outsiders. However, I disagree with LaBruce's point about contemporary camp lacking sophistication or somehow taking away from gay men and other communities using camp to connect and communicate with each other. The presence of camp in mass culture has not stopped camp from continuing to thrive in "camp communities." The work of the three filmmakers, including LaBruce, who I examine in this dissertation are a testament to that. The presence of mainstream camp and the mainstreaming of camp strategies does not undermine gay camp or feminist camp. If anything, it opens up the possibility for more camp spectators. When LaBruce talks about "Bad Straight Camp" in mass culture, his problem with it is that it isn't transgressive and upholds systems of power and heteronormative politics rather than denormalizing them and chipping away at convention. As I point out earlier in the Introduction chapter, scholars (mostly feminists) have shown how the same mainstream "conventional" camp performers and icons that

LaBruce describes (including Britney Spears, Rihanna, Beyonce, Lady Gaga, notably mostly women) do, in fact, challenge the status quo and transgress convention (albeit their efforts are still sometimes limited). LaBruce's frustrations with this kind of camp (or, as he suggests, "anti-camp") echo the warnings by other scholars who point out camp's dual subversive/complicit potential; however LaBruce takes this further when he claims that these examples that appropriate camp remove the subversive potential entirely in favor of catering to mass audiences and mainstream taste.

LaBruce is often associated with the queercore (or homocore) movement, which has strong ties to the punk subculture of the 1980s. If New Queer Cinema was the new experimental, edgy gay representation and response to the AIDS crisis and Hollywood's failure to include substantial gay visibility or explicit gay characters in film, queercore was its anarchistic, kinky punk cousin. Queercore art emerged in various forms, including film, music, and zine publications. Curran Nault describes queercore as "continu[ing] the radical activist tradition of gay sexual liberation, while also retaining punk's shocking and sometimes sinister approach to the erotic."[5] Queercore has received substantially less scholarly attention than New Queer Cinema. Like New Queer Cinema, the queercore movement is often critiqued for centering gay (white) men and perpetuating misogynist rhetoric, violence, and representation. LaBruce challenges the misogyny of queercore by putting women at the center of the politics and narratives in several of his films, including *The Raspberry Reich* (2004), *The Misandrists* (2017), and *Ulrike's Brain* (2017).

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[5] Curran Nault, *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture* (Routledge, 2018).

LaBruce's work engages with a lot of the same recurring themes and stylistic elements as other New Queer Cinema films, including experimental narrative styles, unapologetic gay and queer identity, sexual taboos, and explicit gay sex scenes. Like many New Queer Cinema films, his films contain elements of satire, biting commentary on the dominant status quo, as a critical self-reflexive interrogation of gay male subcultures and revolutionary politics. His films often explore extremes and excess, sexual taboos and extremist ideologies. LaBruce's work reflects a commitment to sex positivity and explores relationship dynamics and identity conflicts. His films highlight tensions within queer politics and often use parody as satire to call attention to ironic activism. In these films he uses the tools of camp to play with queers and feminists who take themselves too seriously.

LaBruce's films blur the line between pornography and art and his films reach a wide array of audiences, albeit mostly still in smaller niche circles outside the mainstream. His films often screen for audiences at arthouse theaters. In 2015 he had a 10-day retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art.[6] His feature film *Gerontophilia* (2015), his only film without hardcore sex scenes, streamed on Netflix in the United States for a period of time. Some of his films are also distributed by porn companies. Others have been banned at film festivals and confiscated by government authorities because of their "obscene" content.

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[6] Michael-Oliver Harding, "When a Radical Gets a Retrospective," *Slate*, May 4, 2015, https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/can-bruce-labruce-remain-subversive-now-that-his-queer-films-are-taken-seriously.html

It is not surprising that some of LaBruce's work talks back to feminism. Queer scholars have long pointed out and explored the tensions between a queer politics and feminist politics. For example, Janet Halley, writing from a postmodern perspective and working within a queer framework has suggested that sometimes it is necessary to "take a break from feminism" because feminism too often fails to critically examine its own relationship to power and is unable to engage fully with the complexities of sexuality, sexual identities, and sexual practices.[7] I would argue that LaBruce's work, and especially *The Misandrists*, pushes further to suggest that feminism would benefit by taking into account a sex-positive queer politics.

Although feminist camp is not limited to women creators, I want to point out that most of the feminist camp that talks back to patriarchy <u>and</u> talks back to feminism has been created by women. Notably, LaBruce is the only man whose work I examine in this dissertation. As a white, cisgender gay man who has long been part of radical queer, anarchist, and punk circles (LaBruce is a key player and leader in the queercore/homocore movement), LaBruce's relationship to feminism and camp is notably different than Biller and Dunye's. Biller's feminism and camp are tied to feminist film theory, early and classic Hollywood, and exploitation films; her camp aesthetic engages and plays with a critical nostalgia for the past. Dunye, on the other hand, was and still is involved with feminist and queer activism, and her use of camp is informed by (and informs) experimental film as well as African American and lesbian independent filmmaking traditions. While both Biller and Dunye's feminist camp is informed by their

[7] Janet Halley, *Split Decisions* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

engagement with Hollywood and mainstream cinema (to an extent), LaBruce's relationship to feminism is as an agitator, trying to call it out but never dismissing it entirely. LaBruce actually knows feminism quite well, but as his career shows, for him nothing is off-limits or above critique, which is why his feminist camp can simultaneously feel so biting, funny, and also very convincing.

The Misandrists (2017) has been celebrated as a "feminist critique of feminism" by film critics.[8] A film review for the feminist magazine *Bitch* calls the film confusing and "muddled," the acting "flat and off-putting," and points out the film's odd blend of second and third wave feminist ideologies, although ultimately acknowledging its campy charm and considers the film unique and timely.[9] *The Misandrists* tells the story of a group of radical feminists at a school for troubled girls in 1999 Germany (which it changes to "Ger(wo)many," to be politically correct) who are trying to find ways to sustain their feminist liberation, lesbian separatist group, the FLA (Female Liberation Army), while dealing with cops, men, financial problems, and divisions within the group. Two narratives drive the film: (1) the story of Isolde, a transgender woman trying to nurse the sick male soldier she is hiding in the basement back to good health while hiding her transgender identity from the rest of the FLA, and (2) the story of Big Mother, the leader of the FLA, trying to save the school and make money by starting her porn movie business with the girls so they can be financially independent while also destroying the

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[8] Trudy Ring, "Bruce LaBruce Critiques Radical Feminism From a Feminist Viewpoint." The Advocate. May 25, 2018, https://www.advocate.com/film/2018/5/25/misandrists-bruce-labruce-critiques-radical-feminism-feminist-viewpoint?amp

[9] Samantha Riedel, "The Misandrists Offers a Muddled Critique of Radical Feminism," *Bitch* (Winter 2018): 77.

patriarchy. Isolde's story differs from typical tragic transgender stories as it is not about her struggling to accept herself, but instead about her having already accepted herself but worrying that she won't be accepted by the other feminists who view Isolde's body (her penis) as a symbol of opposition that must be eradicated to prove her allegiance to women. Big Mother's mission to save the FLA and tear down the patriarchy is all about reappropriating the tools of patriarchy—the male gaze, the cinema—for feminist liberation.

I also want to consider the ways in which *The Misandrists* adds to conversations about lesbian cinema. It should be noted that LaBruce's filmography is not otherwise considered part of lesbian cinema. He might travel through some of the same networks as Cheryl Dunye with other queer, feminist, independent filmmakers, but his work is not usually discussed in the same context as the other lesbian filmmakers with whom Dunye commonly collaborates. This is partly because of the content of LaBruce's films, but also because, as a gay man whose fan base is largely other gay men and radical queers, he is an outsider in a lesbian cinema that is largely defined as being by-and-for lesbians.

I suggest that camp is, particularly for lesbian queer cinema, one of the main tools used to invoke and interrogate a feminist politics. Thus, it seems that feminist scholarship on Queer Cinema would benefit from an exploration of how camp functions to simultaneously promote and interrogate feminist politics and how feminist politics are depicted in relation to queer politics. Humor and comedy are also common elements of lesbian queer cinema. Many of the films are quite funny, especially compared to their Hollywood contemporaries. The comedy—the visual and verbal jokes—reflect an intentionality behind the camp. This intentional excessive, exaggerated, intentionally

ironic representation services a feminist politics while simultaneously critiquing it. Notably, all of the films I have mentioned simultaneously talk back to patriarchy/hetero-patriarchy as well to each other. They all speak back to feminists and/or lesbians to address and complicate intra-group politics.

LaBruce's films typically juxtapose politics with pleasure. He uses a camp sensibility—excessiveness, wordplay, irony, humor—to expose the ways in which both politics and sex can be romanticized in the name of revolutionary politics. Early in *The Misandrists* (2017), we see two girls, presumably in their late teens or early 20s, dressed in school girl uniforms and cuddled next to each other as they watch gay male porn on a big screen. The girls both stare at the two men having sex on screen, simultaneously enthralled and disgusted by the images. One of the girls says that she feels "disgusting" for watching this, to which the other replies that it's okay if it is for research. The girls have been assigned by "Big Mother" (a play on "Big Brother") to study pornography so they can make their own. The character Big Mother in *The Misandrists* and Gudrun in *The Raspberry Reich* are both played by Susanne Sachsse and are in many ways the same character—a ruthless, radical revolutionary leader who use violence and push homosexuality as the best ways to practice revolutionary politics. Both Big Mother and Gudrun take themselves "too seriously" and are extreme versions of revolutionary leaders. We soon find out that the girls live at an all-girls' boarding school in Ger(Wo)many and are members of the FLA, the Feminist Liberation Army. The FLA is preparing to overthrow the patriarchy, of course. As Big Mother constantly reminds them, the girls will soon be making their own feminist lesbian pornography so they can take over movie theaters and share their message with the world.

This scene with the girls is a moment of feminist camp because it simultaneously makes feminism the subject and object of the camp, which renders a comedic effect. It is also one of the many examples of LaBruce's ironic feminism in the film. The girls take feminism so literally to mean that they can only love women, which they take literally to mean they must have sex with women, and only with women, to be "good feminists." Thus, when the girls are watching gay male porn together for "research," planning to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (reappropriating the male gaze and its ultimate outlet—pornography—to overthrow the patriarchy), it creates a comedic camp effect because of its irony and exaggeration. Furthermore, this scene sets up the position of the feminist spectator in feminist camp. Like the girls, the feminist spectator is "asked" to watch something that makes her uneasy and conflicted because it is something she is not "supposed" to like or want to watch (men having sex).[10] In the scene, the girls are watching something that they are not "supposed" to want to see, and yet they like seeing it and continue to watch, so they find a means through which to justify it by saying they're using it for research, as a tools, a weapon to advance their politics that make them feel guilty about watching it in the first place. Similarly, it can feel "wrong" to watch a film, as a feminist, that is poking fun at feminists and using stereotypes (such as the man-hater, the misandrist) that have been used against feminists to discredit feminism.

The Misandrists is a collection of feminist and lesbian stereotypes and tropes. These stereotypes, such as the manhater, have been used to dismiss feminists as dangerous extremists and as justification for not taking feminists seriously. The lesbian

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[10] Note: I use she/her to refer to the feminist spectator but the feminist spectator is not necessarily a woman or gendered position.

tropes and stereotypes fuel common conceptions about lesbians that circulate in pornography and mainstream popular culture and relegate them to objects existing for the purpose of male pleasure. In the film, feminists will recognize political themes that fall within the scope of feminist discourse: radical lesbian separatism, a HERstory class, lessons on female reproduction without men, studying gay male pornography for research, castrating men to "convert" them to the cause. The women exclaim "Ah-wo-men" instead of Amen at the end of their "prayers." There is indeed something funny about seeing feminism taken to these extremes and excesses. It becomes a sort of feminist fantasy on steroids, so literally feminist that it is ridiculous and yet recognizable. Many of the FLA's ideas are feminist-ish, just extreme, "too feminist" that they contradict themselves. For example, the film presents Big Mother as a hypocritical feminist figure. She condemns patriarchy's treatment of women, including objectification, but insists the girls make lesbian pornography and screen it publicly to help their feminist cause. Her ulterior motive, we find out is that she needs to make money off of the porn films. When girls do not want to have sex, as with Isolde, Big Mother advises the girls to use "persuasion" instead of "coercion." Big Mother's idea of persuasion, of course, looks a lot like coercion.

The two classroom scenes in *The Misandrists* play with porn tropes (schoolgirls) and parody the feminist studies classroom, creating "inside jokes" for those "in the know." Notably, the schoolgirl porn trope is also a common trope in lesbian cinema. Katrin Horn observes that classroom scenes are common settings for feminist and lesbian camp, for example in Angela Robinson's *D.E.B.S.* and Jamie Babbit's *But I'm a*

Cheerleader.[11] In the first classroom scene in *The Misandrists*, the girls are learning about parthenogenesis, a type of asexual reproduction that does not require fertilization. As Sister Kembra (their teacher) explains the process, commenting on how it does not occur in humans but hopefully will one day and how that will help their cause, the students express an array of reactions. Some are bored, others are curious, some are distracted by the other girls. However, at the end of the lecture the girls all applaud. The feminist camp in this scene exposes and plays with the disconnect between Sister Kembra, who is trying to pass on important knowledge to her students in hopes that it will help them advance the feminist cause and change the world, and some of the students' other more pressing interests at the moment surrounding sexual desire and sexual pleasure. Furthermore, the scene plays with feminist pedagogy and the irony of Sister Kembra's aspirational but ultimately not useful lesson. Played by American performance artist Kembra Pfahler, whose exaggerated make-up, form-fitting long dress, and unaffected voice as she spews facts to the class adds to her camp sensibility. She seems exhausted and "over it" as she teaches the girls about a concept that doesn't have much impact on their daily lives. Notably, Isolde, whose loyalty to the FLA will be challenged later because she is trans, is the only one who takes the lecture seriously, trying to pay close attention and take notes. In this revolutionary classroom, learning about a form of asexual penis-less reproduction that occurs only in animals but if it could occur in humans would advance the FLA's cause feels silly, like an empty aspiration. The scene's camping of the feminist classroom functions as an inside joke. This is what many

[11] Katrin Horn, *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture*, 2017.

people not “in the know” have in mind when they think of feminist studies—a bunch of lesbians in short skirts flirting with each other while an old feminist talks about a society without men. Those “in the know” will instantly recognize the scene’s playfulness with the misconception of feminist classrooms as well as the ways in which the scene highlights some realities of the feminist classroom—the content, the generational differences, the different reactions from students who are fascinated versus those who are disinterested.

The second feminist classroom scene continues to play with tropes and irony, as Sister Dagmar, played by artist and activist Viva Ruiz known for her ongoing “Thank God For Abortion” activist project, gives the class a “HERstory” lesson. The lecture begins with Sister Dagmar’s voiceover, saying that religious and ethnic minorities have envisioned the eradication of their oppressors and that French peasants gleefully butchered the aristocracy, while we watch two of the girls hanging up laundry and smoking outside. We then enter the classroom where we are positioned behind the rows of students sitting in desks and looking at Sister Dagmar who is sitting casually on the table in the front of the classroom with one of her thigh-high red leather boots hiked up on the table while she holds an uneaten red apple in one hand. In this scene we are invited to see Sister Dagmar as both a camp subject and camp object as she performs an excessive and ironic feminism. She is the sexy teacher, casual in the classroom and holding the apple of temptation, but instead of seducing the students with her body she seduces them with herstory and feminist politics. The close-ups of the students’ faces reacting to Sister Dagmar’s lecture add to the camp effect.

As Sister Dagmar continues to lecture about how women have been oppressed by men throughout all of history, emphasizing that their *her*stories have been erased by *his*tory, that they've been denied their own religion, and overall kept down by the male species, the herstory gets dark and depressing. The students have somber looks on their faces, seemingly hopeless and defeated. This feminist herstory lesson is not empowering, it's depressing! Sister Dagmar adds more, noting that "the female is not even allowed to fantasize about eliminating the male of the species which so causally persecutes her." Before it gets worse, Big Mother crashes the classroom and interrupts the lecture, exclaiming, "That is…until now." As the girls file out of the classroom, Big Mother delivers one of the most memorable lines from the whole film, which is also highlighted in the trailer: "Remember girls, the closest way to a man's heart…is through his chest" as she dismisses the class. This is a moment of feminist camp that uses wordplay and irony to create humor and subvert a cliché phrase. The original cliché phrase, "The closest way to a man's heart is through his stomach" reinforces patriarchal gender norms and the sexist notion that a woman should learn how to cook well if she wants a man to like her, and that, if she wants a man to marry her, she needs to cook meals that he likes. The line in the film sets up the expectation of the cliché phrase and then subverts it in the punchline, changing a cliché phrase telling women to please a man by serving him food into a radical feminist political statement about how to destroy (kill) a man. The comedy comes from both the subversion of expectations (on the cliché phrase) and also in its factual accuracy and taking the word "heart" literally—the closest way to a man's heart, the organ, is, in fact, through his chest. This is one of the many delicious lines from the

film that made critics celebrate it as “a gift from the queer cinema goddesses” and “a total hoot.”[12]

The Misandrists is a film that simultaneously takes feminism seriously and yet, because it is taking feminism seriously, is able to exaggerate and poke fun with it. As Esther Newton points out, one of the goals of camp is to make people laugh.[13] The capacity to make people laugh together enables camp’s community-building function. In this *The Misandrists*, feminism is not laughed *at* or dismissed through the jokes. Rather, LaBruce encourages us to laugh *with* feminism, parodying it to expose its incongruities and contradictions. The overarching punchline for the film is that we should take feminism seriously, but not so literally that we exclude our allies or comrades.

Feminism is “camped” in the film by being taken “too seriously,” to the extreme, it is “extra” and turned into a satirical parody. The FLA, under the direction of Big Mother, advocates for “freedom for all female people” by pushing not for equality, but female power and domination, which involves eradicating men (hence the title, The Misandrists). Big Mother and the FLA understand that patriarchy is deeply embedded in society and not something that surface-level “equality” will necessarily eradicate without a complicate overhaul. Their strategies include “correctives” to patriarchal indoctrination in order to create a feminista “army of lovers,” with re-programming strategies like

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[12] Jude Dry, “The Misandrists’ Review: Bruce LaBruce’s Lesbian Separatist Cult Charms With Sex and Satire—Berlinale 2017.” Indie Wire. February 15, 2017, https://www.indiewire.com/2017/02/the-misandrists-review-bruce-labruce-queer-berlin-2017-1201782596/
Charlie Fox, “Who Runs The World?” Artforum. May 22, 2017, https://www.artforum.com/film/charlie-fox-on-bruce-labruce-s-the-misandrists-68521

[13] Esther Newton, “Role Models,” 1993.

HERstory lessons, love practices/sex as homework, and sex work (making their own pornography).

One of the feminist intra-group conflicts that the film plays with is the tension between trans-inclusive feminism and trans-exclusionary radical feminists ("TERFS"). To be clear, TERFs are nothing new. TERFs, like second wave feminist scholar Janice Raymond, insist on a transphobic definition of "woman" that excludes transwomen from women's spaces, events, and conversations. TERFs tend to perpetuate harmful stereotypes about transwomen that contribute to transphobic violence—discursive, political, and physical. Some TERFs justify their transphobia as a pro-lesbian stance. For example, *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling has been in the news a number of times for her transphobic remarks about transwomen, usually trying to defend them by claiming that she is sticking up for (cis-)women and lesbians (ironically Rowling herself does not identify as lesbian). The FLA in *The Misandrists* is a sex-positive TERF organization that prioritizes genitalia and exclusion over gender identity and inclusion. LaBruce performs a campy nod to TERF Janice Raymond when he makes several cameo appearances in the film as a nun hanging around and inside the school. Janice Raymond was a nun who eventually left the convent and came out as a lesbian. In full nun habit, LaBruce peeps out of windows (also a campy play with the male gaze, having a the fetishized figure of the nun play the role of the voyeuristic Peeping Tom), prances around the schoolgrounds, and remains a lurking presence "monitoring" the girls.

By positioning Isolde, a trans woman of color with a penis, as the heroine of the film, LaBruce directly challenges the FLA's radical feminist, anti-trans ideology, although it does not address racism or white privilege in feminist politics. *The*

Misandrists challenges the fear-inducing notion that transwomen are bad for feminism by making the film's transwoman heroine a model student of feminism. Isolde recites and defends feminist ideology just as well as the rest of the girls (and usually even better). This makes it all the more ridiculous that the FLA would want to exclude her. We are "in" on Isolde's secret (the fact that she has a penis and is hiding another person with a penis, a pro-feminist revolutionary comrade in the basement), which makes the excessiveness of the women-oriented education ("HERstory" class) and the TERF feminist political strategy and call for male (penis) eradication all the more ironic. Furthermore, the fact that Isolde *wants* to keep her penis (doesn't want a sex reassignment surgery), defends her choice, and keeps it in the end (despite the threat of castration) while remaining a member of the FLA makes for a happy ending, if not an ironic one. While the film stands on the side of trans-inclusion and respecting transwomen's agency and bodily autonomy, the FLA doesn't end up adjusting their politics or changing their strategy. Isolde becomes an exception to the rule. She ironically defends a feminist politics and worldview that does not include women like her and wants to eradicate them.

The campy excessiveness of the FLA's feminist politics reveals that their ideas are actually not that revolutionary. In fact, some of the FLA's ideas uphold the very patriarchal ideas about women that they are trying to resist. After Big Mother learns that Isolde is hiding a man (the revolutionary soldier) in the basement, Big Mother decides that he must be castrated. The soldier pleads to keep his penis and insists that he is "one of them" and also a feminist. Isolde ends up being the one who gives him the ultimatum—to put his politics into practice (plus she tells him that she would never date a

man). Isolde denies the soldier the same respect for agency and bodily autonomy that she requests for herself.

LaBruce tackles feminist intra-group debates about trans inclusion; however, he skirts around other identity issues like race. He avoids a direct engagement with race, despite setting up various opportunities. Ultimately, this limits his critique of feminism which ends up reproducing the type of "colorblind" feminism that is not actually colorblind but the kind of white feminism that avoids engaging with racism and racial difference. Isolde's character is one of the four women of color—two students and two teachers—in the FLA, a predominantly white feminist organization. During a heart-to-heart one-on-one conversation between Sister Dagmar, a woman of color, and Isolde, the issue of difference comes up. The conversation occurs after Isolde is chastised by the group for not participating in their practice of free love (having sex with the other students to show feminist solidarity) and her secret (the solider) is revealed. Sister Dagmar tells Isolde that she knows she's (Isolde) is different. The difference to which she is referring is Isolde's trans identity. Isolde cries and Dagmar reveals her own secret—that she was born two-spirit and assigned female at birth—"thank goddess!" Unlike the other girls, Dagmar was able to "read" Isolde because she identified with her "secret." The elephant in the room, of course, which is not a secret but very visible, is that Isolde and Dagmar are two of the four women of color in a group of white women who are trying to tell everyone what to do with their bodies. In this moment, LaBruce emphasizes gender difference while overlooking racial difference. This speaks to the larger issue in

camp about the complicity with racism and colorblind ideology in service of gender subversion and sexual transgression which I have addressed earlier.[14]

Feminist-Extra

The Raspberry Reich and *The Misandrists* both mock activists in queer and feminist communities who take themselves "too seriously" and uncritically promote radical political positions. That being said, LaBruce's parody of queer and feminist extremists is a bit ironic given that he and his art often move in these circles. LaBruce self-identifies as a gay, queer, sex-positive feminist. His films are dripping with excess even as they look low budget. They look more like guerrilla filmmaking than Classical Hollywood cinema. Unlike Anna Biller's films that have elaborate sets and endless props, the excess in LaBruce's work is more about pushing things further than we would expect—scenes drag on (albeit for good reason), particularly sex scenes, and characters go on long rants. The depictions of politics and sex as excessive and "extra" in his films are shocking, sometimes jolting. It provokes. He uses cinematography, editing, and characters who take themselves and their politics too seriously to sexualize politics and deromanticize (and politicize) sex.

Politics and sex are interlinked in LaBruce's work. They are also both excessive. An early shot in *The Raspberry Reich* is a close-up of a man putting a gun into his mouth as a song sung by a woman with a breathy voice plays. As he starts sucking on

[14] For example, see Robertson, "Mae West's Maids," 2008 and Hatch, "Mae West: The Constant Sinner," 2017.

the gun, the camera pulls back to reveal that he is sitting alone in a room, surrounded by a fish tank and a bunch of guns, in front of a wall-size mural of Che Guevara. We watch the man suck on the gun and stroke and lick another gun as we hear bullet sound effects. The potential for visual pleasure is hijacked by the looming fear that he might do something with one of the guns. At the same time, the symbol of the gun, a symbol of violence and revolution, is temporarily repurposed for erotic pleasure. Moments like this express the "terrorist chic" or "radical chic" elements in LaBruce's work.

LaBruce manages to make sex unromantic, reorienting our gaze. While the man is playing with guns, a woman (who we learn is Gudrun, the leader and mastermind behind the revolutionary group) and another man are having sex in the next room. This is not your typical sex scene. The camera zooms in on body parts only to cut away to posters of revolutionary figures and propaganda statements. Gudrun's shouting is excessive, but it is not about sexual pleasure, but rather revolution. She shouts, "fuck me for the revolution!" Gudrun and the man then proceed to take their sex to the streets, as a show of revolutionary activism. They shock and horrify an older conservative looking man and woman in the elevator on their way out of the building. Ironically, the couple ends up getting turned on by watching Gudrun's revolutionary sex act and has sex inside their apartment. While Gudrun is still in the middle of this seemingly never-ending sex with her boyfriend, she shouts revolutionary phrases which also appear on screen, like "Down with all the institutions that have made and sustained capitalism and the capitalist class system that has oppressed and exploited all of the people of our history." Ironically, Gudrun's revolutionary sex activism also turns her into a camp object and a parody of the politics she so seriously promotes.

In another example of excess and parody, *The Misandrists* takes the stereotype of the manhater, the misandrist—the ultimate feminist stereotype used to discredit and silence feminists—and plays with it, taking it to its extremes. Research on stereotypes reveals that the problem with stereotypes is not that they are always incorrect or inauthentic, but that they are often, through repetition and lack of other images, what becomes solidified as the image that defines a group of people and ignores intra-group complexities and differences. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."[15] Patricia Hill Collins argues that there is a correlation, even causation, between stereotypes and oppression, and considers the ways in which stereotypes can become "controlling images" that severely limit the way a group is represented.[16]

Although stereotypes have been used to oppressed and control the images of minority groups, they also sometimes function as tools that reveal realities and highlight truths. Feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon takes a radical feminist position on stereotypes. She argues that representations of women function to uphold patriarchy by normalizing subordination. This is in contrast to a more liberal feminist perspective, which views stereotypes as distortions rather than reflections of an oppressive structure. MacKinnon insists that in order to undo the oppressive power of stereotypes we must first transform the meaning of the images and the types themselves. I want to examine the

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[15] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of A Single Story" TEDGlobal, 2009. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/details?language=en

[16] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2008.

ways in which T*he Misandrists* does this, how the film uses parody for comedic effect to transform the meaning of the stereotype of the misandrist and reclaim it for feminism.

The figure of the misandrist, the man-hater, as feminist excess, is what drives the feminist camp in the film and a source for the comedy. As Anneke Smelick explains, "the 'image-as-excess' can have the simultaneous effect of uncanniness and humor."[17] The man-hater takes feminism "too literally"— she takes equality further, to an extreme, to hatred for or a desire to eradicate men and hierarchize women. The man-hater usually appears in popular culture during and after periods of political and economic gain for women and LGBTQ. In the 1960s sex comedies— the feisty woman who needs to be tamed. 1980s—the corporate career woman who needs to be tamed. But what is unique here, is that the film is not trying to tame the man-haters, but rather to glorify them— albeit in a tongue-in-cheek way. It is a guilty pleasure (à la Robertson), and that is exactly LaBruce's intention. The stereotype of the feminist as man- hater, epitomized by the lesbian-feminist separatist, is viewed as dangerous because it threatens to unite women at the expense of men. However, the film shows the stereotype to be divisive within the group as well.

Another moment of excess in the films involve LaBruce's use of intertitles. The intertitles in both *The Raspberry Reich* and *The Misandrists* serve as campy interruptions that redirect the spectator's attention and use camp strategies to do so. Sometimes the intertitles are ironic and create a juxtaposition between what we are seeing in the images versus the words. During one of the sex scenes between two men who Gudrun has

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[17] Anneke Smelick, *And The Mirror Cracked*, 151.

coerced into having sex on camera, the words flash intermittently on screen like "Make revolutionary love not (imperialistic) war," "The arrogance of the strong will be met by the violence of the weak," and "Join the homosexual intifada." Gudrun's goal is to make gay porn that will entice others to join but the visual pleasure is interrupted by the politics. The film presents arguments that have been made by activists in real life, but these are undermined by the campy excess of other statements. For example, at one point we see intertitles flash on screen that call out corporate hip-hip and Madonna for being counter-revolutionary. But later, when Gudrun makes the kidnapped prisoner read a list of behaviors and items that count as counter-revolutionary out loud on camera, he reads off a list off of items that include conflicts, cornflakes, and masturbation as counterrevolutionary.

During various moments in the film the characters "talk back" to Gudrun. Their lines briefly interrupt the action and draw attention to Gudrun's excessiveness. At the same time, they take Gudrun too seriously. They are the "straight men" to Gudrun's comedic campy excess. At one point when Gudrun is having sex with her boyfriend at the beginning of the film, she turns to the camera and goes on a long rant about revolution and sex. In the middle of her speech her boyfriend interrupts, exhausted, and says "Come on, you know I have a bad back." One character, one of the members of The Raspberry Reich who falls in love with the man they kidnap is constantly drawing attention to the ironies in the film. When he is with three other guys in a car, en route to the kidnapping, he remarks "I'm not a terrorist." Another guy insists, "we're not terrorists, we're activists." "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," another says, only to be corrected by a guy who retorts "or *woman's*." These characters take their politics and

their political correctness seriously. The irony is that they are arguing about terminology while they are planning to kidnap a man who is actually one of them (the kidnapping victim turns out to be a gay man who hates his fascist businessman father).

The final scene of the film involves the FLA united and working together, having come together as women, for the liberation of women, despite their differences. Hilde the undercover cop is now working for the FLA, the male soldier is now castrated and working for the FLA, and Isolde still has her penis and is working for the FLA. The group raids a public movie theater in school girl uniforms, camo, and guns and take control of the theater screen, interrupting the originally programmed film to force the captive audience—a mix of men and women—to watch the FLA's homemade feminist pornography. In the homemade video, the girls perform the stereotype—the male fantasy of peeping in on lesbian lovemaking, the male fantasy of a girls' slumber party—but reappropriate it and politicize it for feminist gain. The slumber party scene camps the stereotype—exaggerating it, slowing it down with slo-mo, showing the reactions of women in the theater, enthralled and captivated by what they are seeing on screen. And this camping of the stereotype of the male-gazey lesbian slumber party fantasy, in contrast with the FLA members standing next to the big screen in school girl camo gear and holding guns, creates a comedic effect. In this moment, the FLA (and Big Mother) controls the controlling image typically used to control women's representation.

LaBruce deploys a feminist camp gaze in two main ways. He reappropriates sexist images for radical feminist (camp) and he parodies sexist tropes. In doing this, LaBruce inevitably reproduces that which he challenges. For example, the film recycles the sexy Catholic schoolgirl uniform for the feminist/lesbian gaze. The girls wear the

same kind of sexualized schoolgirl outfits that are common in pornography and pop culture to sexualize and objectify young women and appropriate lesbian sexuality and pleasure for the pleasure of the (straight) male gaze.

The film even has scenes that, out of context, look like something out of a schoolgirl porn video, with girls in uniform making out and a big dream-like slumber party orgy scene in their homemade porn video orchestrated by Big Mother. And yet the film denies the male gaze and does not offer any real way to access a (straight) male spectator position within the film. The only two men who appear in the film are the cop and the soldier. The cop has a minimal role and appears only when he stops by the school looking for the escaped soldier and briefly interrogates Big Mother and the girls, who perform the stereotype of schoolgirl—naïve and "innocent," but flirtatious—to avoid having to deal with the cop any further. The soldier has a more integral role in the film. We see him in the first couple minutes of the film, injured and limping in the woods as he escapes from his fellow soldiers, abandoning his army and effectively committing treason. Isolde rescues him and agrees to nurse him back to health in the basement of the school. Isolde points out that the soldier and all the women in the FLA are rebels. Everyone in the film except the cop is effectively committing treason against the status quo.

The potential for a (straight) male gaze with the soldier is undermined by the fact that he is ultimately castrated and "converted" to womanhood and becomes a member of the FLA. Before this, though, the film challenges the stability and certainty of any male gaze by complicating the soldier's relationship with Isolde. The soldier is attracted to Isolde, as a woman, and soon finds out, from Isolde, that she (Isolde) is a woman "with a

cock.” The soldier is at first shocked and angry about this, but Isolde calls him out on this and insists that she is a woman. Before they have sex, Isolde points out the soldier’s hypocrisy; he is a rebel soldier resisting the status quo and conventions enforced from the top-down, and yet he is willing to discredit Isolde as a woman and reject his attraction to her because she has a penis. As Isolde says to the soldier, and it is as if she is saying it to the entire FLA and feminists in general, “it’s time to reconcile your revolutionary beliefs with your sexual politics.” This moment ends much better (less violent) than many encounters in real life where straight men get “angry” when they find out the woman they are attracted to is transgender. Gradually, the film attempts to chip away at the soldier’s masculinity, or at least at what society considers to be legitimate as masculinity. The soldier is injured, with one of his members, his leg, incapacitated, and ultimately ends up being castrated and accepting a new identity as a woman in order to be part of the FLA and be able to be with Isolde, who pressures him to become a woman. Thus, the one significant male character in the film is ultimately co-opted for the feminist gaze, by the end of the film literally carrying a gun and protesting with the FLA as they take over a movie theater and impose the feminist gaze via their screening of their homemade feminist pornography.

The film is constantly subverting the male gaze and undermining its subject (the male spectator) and object (the passive woman, fetishized body parts). Big Mother, the leader of the FLA has a bad leg and wears a fake leg; the ultimate object of the male gaze is a fake. In the film’s Peeping Tom (or rather, Peeping Thomasina) scene, Hilde, an undercover cop who ends up joining the FLA, sneaks into the bathroom to look at Isolde in the shower, and sees her penis. In this moment, the film challenges the structure of the

male gaze via the Peeping Tom. Hilde, a woman, peeps in on Isolde, another woman in the shower, and finds not the typical object of the Peeping Tom, but rather a penis, the epitome of male power and domination, but deprived of any power. Indeed, in the film the penis, via Isolde's penis, is deprived of power and instead functions as a means for women's (Isolde's) pleasure.

The shower scene is also about feminist hypocrisy, which is a theme throughout the film. Hilde is an undercover cop who is willing to sell out and spy on her fellow women for professional gain and yet she is going to expose Isolde as a fraud to Big Mother and the FLA because Isolde has a penis and thus will be considered a traitor for not being a "real woman" per essentialist womyn-born-womyn standards. Furthermore, when we get introductions to the girls early in the film via Isolde's conversation with a nosy Hilde, we learn that all of the girls come from "troubled" backgrounds and that all the women in the FLA have engaged in less than "honorable" acts. Except for Isolde—whose only "secret" is that she has a penis. And yet Isolde is depicted as the most level-headed and fully-committed member of the FLA, suggesting that to exclude transwomen from feminism is to turn your back on fellow women and weaken the group.

With Isolde's character and the FLA's radical and literal interpretation of feminism, the film explores some of the limitations of cultural and radical feminisms.[18] The FLA's teachings about patriarchy and oppression reflect a radical feminist politics and their emphasis on women's culture, history, and feminine imagery are rooted in

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[18] The FLA's feminism includes ideas advanced by radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone and Valerie Solanas. Ironically, Solanas became a sort of grotesque camp figure of an extremist feminism after she attempted to assassinate Andy Warhol, a celebrated pop camp icon.

cultural feminism. Feminist queer scholar Gayle Rubin critiques the ways in which radical and cultural feminisms reject everything associated with men and masculinity in order to lift up women.[19] In her essay "The Leather Menace," Rubin argues for a more inclusive sex-positive and BDSM-inclusive feminism and points out the irony in the ways in which certain strains of feminism will insist on an essentialist view of gender that actually ends up reinforcing conservative and mainstream gender roles and norms. She refers to this as "femininism," a type of feminism that reinscribes the male/female binary and the masculine/feminine values attached to it. Rubin's best line from the essay is when she adds, "I, for one, did not join the women's movement to be told how to be a good girl."[20] Ironically, *The Misandrists*, a film about "man haters" reclaims transwomen, through the character of Isolde, for radical and cultural feminism.

Camping the Spectacle

Part of the camp effect of *The Misandrists* involves reorienting the spectacle. The film interrupts typical scenes of spectacle that cater to the male gaze. Furthermore, it makes a spectacle out of feminism. In her reading of *Gold Diggers of 1933* as feminist camp, Robertson discusses the relationship between camp and spectacle.[21] She contends that the women in the film act out the stereotype of the gold digger, making a spectacle of

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[19] Gayle Rubin, "The Leather Menace," in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (Boston: Alyson Books, 1982), 192-225.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Feminist film theorists also complicate our understanding of the spectacle. For example: Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1987; Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1990.

themselves, effectively producing feminist camp. Moreover, Robertson suggests that female spectators recognize this performance, the spectacle the characters make, and thus are able to read the film as camp spectators. This, Robertson insists, expands the realm of camp beyond how it is traditionally discussed—as a cultural production and reading practice specific to gay men—to recognize women as producers and reader of camp.

The Misandrists makes a spectacle out of feminism but not in service of patriarchy. Typically, when films or media make a spectacle out of feminism it is working to undermine it and render feminism either unnecessary, irrelevant, or going too far. Diane Negra contends that many contemporary chick flicks embrace a postfeminist message by suggesting that career women, women who want equality with men, and independent women are depicted as unhappy and unfulfilled because they are too "masculine" and not sufficiently feminine. As mentioned earlier, Big Mother and the FLA are not interested in equality between the sexes, for they do not buy that that will actually liberate women from the patriarchy. Rather, they want a complete overhaul of the system and want to overhaul what Louis Althusser refers to as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), a set of institutions that reproduce hegemonic Ideology and interpolates individuals as subjects in relation to that Ideology.[22]

It should be noted that feminist backlash in film and media is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is quite common after periods of feminist political gains. For example, the sex comedies of the late 1950s and 1960s showcased dilemmas of the "modern woman" who, despite women's increased visibility in the public sphere and in

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[22] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 1970.

the workforce during World War II, and the sexual revolution, was depicted as unfulfilled and wallowing over her personal life, which the films often showed as negatively impacted by the indoctrination of feminism.

In the film, Feminism becomes a spectacle when it is performed. The women in the film are constantly engaging in different performances of feminism or what they view as feminism. They "perform feminism" to show solidarity, build community, and maintain acceptance within their group. When the girls have sex with each other or talk about having sex with each other throughout the film, they describe it as building a bond with their fellow sisters to make strong Big Mother's army of lovers. The girls' sex with each other functions as a display of feminism, the ultimate act of feminist solidarity against patriarchy. We see them "make a scene" out of sex and intimacy, making it more about proving their commitment to the FLA than pleasure or intimacy.

The film also makes a spectacle out of the two men who appear, but to a different effect. The cop, who we only see for one scene, becomes a spectacle of male incompetence and the ineptness of patriarchy when he unsuccessfully tries to interrogate the girls about the missing soldier's whereabouts. The male soldier, who we see throughout the film, becomes a spectacle in the castration scene and the following movie theater invasion scene, when he transforms from an impotent man to an active member of the FLA fighting the same patriarchy that was chasing after him earlier in the film.

While the film makes feminism into a spectacle, it resists turning Isolde or her transness into a spectacle, refusing to fetishize her even as the other members of the FLA try to do so. Isolde is the "real" character in a sea of other characters who are camp objects. At the beginning of the film, big secret Isolde is keeping from everyone is that

she is trans. This poses a problem for her because the FLA preaches a womyn-born-womyn brand of feminism that resists all things male and masculine. Similar to the Raspberry Reich organization, the FLA practices homosexuality as a revolutionary act and way to build up comrades. Basically, all of the girls in the FLA are having sex with each other except for Isolde. The other girls think this is because she is a prude, but it's really just because she has a penis (for the FLA, the ultimate horror is to have sex with a penis). When Isolde meets the runaway soldier (a cisgender man) who wants to be a revolutionary, she tells him that "it's time to reconcile your revolutionary beliefs with your sexual politics." She and the guy have sex not for pleasure, but to prove political alliances. For the members of the FLA, sexual pleasure is heightened by their political agenda.

We see the sexual encounter between Isolde and the soldier from the point of view of Ute, another girl with the FLA who is frustrated that Isolde won't have sex with her. In a camped reimagining of the classic Peeping Tom scenario, the peeping does not incite pleasure for Ute, but disgust. In another scene one of the other girls peeps in on Isolde while she is in the shower and sees Isolde's penis, the alleged confirmation that Isolde is a traitor to their cause. After Big Mother and others grow more suspicious about Isolde's refusal to have sex with any of them, Big Mother decides that she wants them to all make love with each other in front of the camera, to demonstrate their loyalty to the movement. She ironically insists, "there will be no coercion, only persuasion." Later, when they all participate in Big Mother's homemade porn film "for the revolution," Isolde has sex with the other girls for the first time. The camera refuses to focus in on

genitalia, resisting the tendency to fetishize Isolde's penis and instead emphasizing her similarities with the girls as she gets lost in a sea of sisterhood.

LaBruce has said that he intended *The Misandrists* to be a sort of extension of *The Raspberry Reich* albeit with a more explicitly feminist and lesbian focus. The films received mixed responses from audiences and critics, with some reprimanding the film and others celebrating it. It has had a particularly polarizing response by feminists. I attended a screening of the film and Q & A with LaBruce at the arthouse Landmark Nuart Theatre in Los Angeles back in 2018. The audience appeared to be mostly fans and followers of LaBruce's work—most everybody in the audience seemed to "get" the film—they laughed together, were grossed out together, and gave LaBruce a wild applause and standing ovation at the end. In the discussion afterward, LaBruce explained that the film had received a pretty negative response from film festivals, especially feminist ones, that were outraged by the "bad representation" in his film. It seems that for these feminists who reacted negatively to the film (note that some saw the film and were outraged while others protested the film altogether without seeing it), the film's clichés, including the ultimate feminist/lesbian cliché of the "manhater" were too much. Moreover, the campy, over-the-top excessive style in which these clichés were portrayed rendered the film practically blasphemous in their eyes (or their imaginations, for the ones who protested the film by refusing to see it).

LaBruce is not an outsider, though. In a film review for *The Misandrists* in *The Advocate*, LaBruce claims to be a "certain stripe of feminist," as he explains why he wanted to make a film critiquing feminism when, as the film critic pointed out, "there are

so many harmful things in the world to critique."[23] In the article, LaBruce talks about his "history with feminism and with lesbians" as he studied feminist studies in college, has collaborated on films with lesbians and feminists, and has often circulated among lesbian feminist circles.

In the article for *The Advocate* LaBruce insists that the film is not so much a critique of feminism but a critique of extremism in any kind of movement, pointing out how political movements on both the right and left can forgo civil liberties in the name of politics. He specifies that he wanted the film to critique a particular brand of second-wave feminism that was very anti-porn and very anti-trans. Indeed, LaBruce's film is a critique of feminism from the inside. His films are sex-positive, sexually explicit, trans-inclusive, and pro-revolution while also always being tongue-in-cheek about revolutionary politics. One moment in *The Raspberry Reich* literally tosses one feminist perspective away for another. At the beginning of the film when we see Gudrun cheerfully walking down the street, she tosses a copy of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (a classic feminist text) in a trash can. We then cut to a shot of her reading a revolution text and see her pull out a red copy of *The Communist Manifesto* from her purse. This moment reveals the ways in which the group's blind ideology and commitment to "revolution-for-the-sake-of-revolution" is ironic and counter-productive. The joke here is that *Mrs. Dalloway* prioritizes female experience while *The Communist Manifesto* ignores it completely.

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[23] Trudy Ring, "Bruce LaBruce Critiques Radical Feminism From a Feminist Viewpoint," 2018.

LaBruce's work differs from Biller's and Dunye's in a number of ways. His films involve more explicit depictions of violence and sex, and sometimes violent sex. Although he is a self-proclaimed feminist he seems more dedicated to provocation than any label. His network also extends beyond film into other spaces for explicit queer art and pornography. His films have been banned and picketed, confiscated and rejected—not just by conservative mainstream folks but also by other gays, queers, feminists, and filmmakers. Although sometimes critics sometimes don't "get" his work, other times they "get it" but are too afraid to endorse such "obscene" material. That being said, LaBruce had a substantial dedicated fanbase. LaBruce's most recent work involves a feature film, *Saint-Narcisse* (2020), which is described as a queer comedy set in 1972 Canada about two male twins that explores incest, repression, and revenge, and *Service Station* (2020), a gay porn inspired by a series of comics drawn by the Finnish erotic gay illustrator Tom of Finland, who was known for creating highly stylized, hypermasculine homoerotic art.[24]

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[24] Elsa Keslassy, Bruce LaBruce's Queer Comedy 'Saint-Narcisse' Acquired by Best Friend Forever," *Variety*, June 10, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/global/bruce-labruces-queer-comedy-saint-narcisse-acquired-by-best-friend-forever-exlcusive-1234630188/; Mikelle Street, "Bruce LaBruce's Tom of Finland Gay Porn Releases This Week," *Out*, January 23, 2020, https://www.out.com/sex/2020/1/23/bruce-labruces-tom-finland-gay-porn-releases-week

Conclusion: Other Sites for Campy Feminism

In the previous chapters I have argued for a facet of camp that talks back to feminism and challenges a feminist audience. I explored this type of feminist camp in the work of Anna Biller, Cheryl Dunye, and Bruce LaBruce, three independent filmmakers who use camp to resist norms as well and "play with" feminism. In this conclusion chapter I want to consider other spaces where feminist camp occurs and recognize that feminist use of camp has recently become more mainstream and more easily accessible to a wider audience, namely comedy audiences via web series and filmed sketch comedy. I also consider the relationship between camp and comedy, camp and parody, as well as the limitations of each for feminist politics.

Linda Hutcheon's work on parody addresses its political potential as well as its limitations. She locates parody as a postmodernist strategy and a form of ironic representation that, despite other scholars' claims to the contrary, "works to foreground the politics of representation" and is a "value-problematizing, denaturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation."[1] Hutcheon also accepts that parody has its limitations. Namely, it is what she refers to as "doubly-coded," meaning that it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies.[2] Parody

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[1] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism,* 1989, 90.
[2] Ibid., 97.

exaggerates the truth (often for comedic effect) and in doing so denaturalizes and deconstructs it. However, the exaggeration inevitably invokes and reproduces the norm which it is destabilizing. Helen Shugart similarly acknowledges that not all forms of parody are subversive and suggests that parody's subversive potential lies in its ability to "demystify."[3] She argues that an "aesthetic of excess" is what pushes parody beyond its function to denaturalize and enable it to reveal the tools and techniques used to construct that which is being parodied.

Camp serves as a tool for feminism to play with patriarchy, namely by playing with gender essentialism and, in doing so, denaturalizing it. To echo Richard Dyer, camp "dismiss[es] the [patriarchal] content as trivial." Pamela Robertson argues that, "for feminists, camp's appeal resides in its potential to function as a form of gender parody."[4] She also connects camp and parody to feminist film theory by exploring the connection between parody and masquerade. Robertson claims,

> The concept of the masquerade allows us to see that what gender parody takes as its object is not the image of the woman, but the idea—which, in camp, becomes a joke—that an essential feminine identity exists prior to the image. As [Judith] Butler observes, 'the parody is of the very notion of an original.'[5]

The "joke" to which Robertson refers—that "womanhood" and femininity are "natural"—works to support a feminist politics that views gender as a social construction that is not innate but learned, practiced, and performed.

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[3] Shugart, "Parody as Subversive Performance," 2001.
[4] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 1996, 10.
[5] Ibid., 12.

Scholars have explored the connections between gender parody and camp's use of parody, namely how parody works to deconstruct essentialist notions of gender.[6] Most of this work focuses on the production of the parody and the camp performers. Shugart, along with Waggoner, expands this conversation by bringing in the issue of reception.[7] They argue that parody "infuses camp as a phenomenon of reception."[8] Here they echo other scholars' discussions of camp as a reading practice. This reading practice, the way of seeing and interpreting the world, is what links together the performance and reception aspects of camp. Camp performers "do" camp *because* they are camp readers. Although not all camp readers perform camp on stage or for an audience, their camp spectatorship is an active position that is another kind of performance of their identity which links them to camp culture and marginalized communities.

Feminist camp scholarship brings together work on parody and camp to show how feminist parody instills an active feminist gaze and also invites a feminist against-the-grain reading of mainstream norms. Most of this work focuses on parody as a strategy for feminist critique of patriarchy. What often gets overlooked is how parody can also function to critique feminism. I began this dissertation with the example of *Portlandia*'s campy feminists Toni and Candace to show how feminists (Carrie Brownstein and Fred Armisen) use camp to parody and laugh *with* the feminist community to which they belong. This is different than most of the examples that early camp scholars describe, such as the classic example of gay male drag queens who parody

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[6] For example, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990).
[7] Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, 2008.
[8] Ibid., 31.

gender by performing excessive versions of femininity (the men disrupt and deconstruct gender by performing that which they are not "supposed" to be—women).

Toni and Candace's performances perhaps have more in common with the examples of camp described by feminist scholars like Robertson, Shugart and Waggoner, and Horn, whose examples involve cisgender women who masquerade in an excessive femininity (the cisgender women denaturalize femininity by performing excessive femininity, blurring the lines between femininity and masculinity, but ultimately performing that which they are already considered to be—women). My example of Toni and Candace does not involve parodying gender or femininity so much as a stereotype of a political identity (feminist) with which they self-identify. In this sense, Brownstein and Armisen perform a form of "feminist drag" when they perform as Toni and Candace. Unlike the type of drag that uses parody to deconstruct essentialist notions of gender, Toni and Candace's feminist drag is not de-essentializing because feminists are already considered to be challenging essentialist notions of womanhood. Instead, Toni and Candace's feminist drag performs the feminist *stereotype* that they are already considered to be because they are feminists. Although stereotypes work to solidify images so that they seem natural, they ultimately are not natural but the result of systems of power at work. Toni and Candace's feminist drag reappropriates stereotypes of feminists as tools for feminist entertainment, critical self-reflection, and community-building. At the "debate" at The Last Bookstore, mentioned in my introduction chapter, with the feminist professors and a feminist-friendly audience, the feminist laughter in response to Toni and Candace's performance laughs *with* them and laughs *with* the stereotype. This laughter *with* works to strip the stereotype of its power.

Feminism still carries with it the weight of the stereotype of the "humorless feminist." Christopher Hitchens's now infamous 2007 *Vanity Fair* article entitled "Why Women Aren't Funny" makes the claim that women and comedy are inherently disinclined to humor, using faulty biology and gender essentialism as evidence. Despite discussing women's comedy in favor of a traditional and outdated and unsubstantiated understanding of women's relationship to comedy and humor as "antithetical," the article has had a significant impact on feminist comedy studies, largely because it incited feminist scholars of comedy and women comedians to prove this longstanding claim wrong.[9] I turn briefly here to the notion of feminist laughter to consider the ways in which feminist camp, and particularly the type of feminist camp that talks back to feminism, uses parody to "demystify" the stereotype of the humorless feminist.

Portlandia's Toni and Candace show how feminists can use camp to engage with stereotypes and talk back to patriarchy. At the same time, their camp performances also challenge feminist audiences by showing them exaggerated versions of themselves that are incongruous with how most feminists see themselves. Shugart argues that incongruence is not enough to make parody subversive.[10] She insists that the incongruence needs to be excessive enough to be demystified. The subversive potential of parody lies in its ability to reveal the strategies that are used to uphold the stereotype, image, or norm as natural. Incongruity denaturalizes to reveal the construction and performative excess reveals what holds up the construction. In the case of Toni and

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[9] See Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
[10] Shugart, "Parody as Subversive Performance," 2001.

Candace, they are parodies of the humorless feminist, the self-righteous feminist who takes feminism too seriously. Toni and Candace believe in feminist values like gender equality, empowering women, and trans inclusiveness. However, their excessive feminism takes some of these ideas too far or too literally such that they end up acting in ways that aren't feminist. For example, when Candace's son enters the bookstore with his newborn son and refers to his son as "he," Candace says that she does not want to know the gender and that she doesn't even know her own gender, Toni's gender, or her son's gender. Her son replies that he is a man, to which Candace replies "you don't know that, you could be a woman." The three of them proceed to argue about gender and it becomes obvious that in trying to challenge gender essentialism and avoid conflating sex with gender, Candace and Toni actually mis-gender Candace's son. While Candace prides herself on raising her son in a genderless household, but the son says that it was "really confusing."

In the Toni and Candace sketches, the incongruity is that their unwavering and literal commitment to feminism makes them act and treat people in ways that are not very feminist. Their repeated excessive performances, amplified by the fact that Armisen and Brownstein are themselves feminists who don't act like Toni and Candace, and supported by mannerisms and phrases that the characters use to "do" their feminism work to demystify the feminist stereotype. Toni and Candace are ironic parodies of feminism because they actually aren't that feminist at all but rather a grotesque version that turns off even other feminist characters in the sketches.

In *Living A Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed describes a correlation between the figure of the "humorless feminist" and the "feminist killjoy." She explains that those who frame

feminists as humorless mistake the refusal to laugh for lacking a *sense of humor*. Rather, Ahmed re-frames refusal to laugh as a form of resistance. In many instances, this involves a refusal to laugh at sexist jokes, or jokes that perpetuate patriarchal power and uphold misogyny. On the flip side, Rebecca Krefting observes the ways in which audiences use laughter to claim space, power, and assert agency. She explains, "Not laughing or laughing in moments not intended to be comical (though they are) are ways that audiences have historically asserted themselves, revealing comic frames particular to minority communities."[11] Laughter is a tool that feminists use to "talk back to" comic performers, jokes, and representations, whether "laughing with," "laughing at," or denying a laugh. Ahmed suggests that feminists laugh at jokes and experiences "in recognition of the shared absurdity of this world."[12] Feminists laugh together in recognition of a shared community and sensibility, with shared laughter reflecting a shared perspective. Ahmed explains, "sometimes we laugh with each other because we recognize that we recognize the same power relations."[13] Here, laughter functions as a tool of resistance as well as a tool for recognition and strengthening solidarity. To laugh together is to think together. Below I include a brief look at some examples of more mainstream camp that challenges feminism and feminist audiences.

"Milk Milk Lemonade" (*Inside Amy Schumer*)

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[11] Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 2014, 172.
[12] Sara Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 245.
[13] Ibid.

In “Milk Milk Lemonade,” Schumer parodies pop and hip-hop music videos that objectify women’s body parts and portray women as sex objects to be consumed. The sketch hones in on popular culture’s obsession with women’s butts and the irony of a culture that criticizes women for being “fat” and having big butts, while also idealizing big booties as more desirable, and thus more powerful.[14] The sketch exposes the hypocrisy in a culture that allegedly celebrates “women” but only superficially. That is, when women’s butts are celebrated in popular culture it is almost always in relation to men’s pleasure. Women’s butts are attractive and desirable only insofar as men fantasize about them and can use them as a means to access pleasure. What the sketch reveals is the unspoken and unrecognized reality that the primary function of women’s butts is not male pleasure, but defecation.

The sketch employs camp to emphasize the irony of popular culture’s adoration of women’s butts. It is through the disconnect of image and words—hearing nicknames for butts like “turd cutter,” “fudge machine,” and “dookie maker,” over close-ups of women’s booties shaking and twerking—that one “truth” is exposed as constructed while an unspoken reality is brought to light as true. The “inauthentic,” fabricated “truth” is the patriarchal construction of women’s butts as sex objects and tools for male pleasure, where bigger equals better except when bigger means “fat” and thus undesirable and thus lacking value within a patriarchal framework where there is a direct correlation between

[14] Hip Hop Feminist scholarship is useful for thinking about women’s bodies in popular culture, particularly women of color and the extent to which they control their own image and reappropriate stereotypes, finding empowerment in taking back and recycling, performing stereotypes and ideals. For example, see the music videos for Nicki Minaj “Anaconda,” Jennifer Lopez and Iggy Azalea’s “Booty”

women's bodies and their worth and power. The "reality" that is brought to light is that the actual, real, intended function of women's butts is not for male pleasure but for discharging, excreting; as the song puts it frankly, the booty is where poo comes out.

The sketch recycles recognizable elements from popular culture—images, costumes, types of shots, and dance moves—to subvert them. On a visual level, the music video gives us what we would expect from a music video idealizing big butts. The layers of camp—the inserts of fudge, milk, dogs, faucets, chocolate, toilet paper, exaggerated dance moves, and exaggerated costumes—juxtaposed with lyrics that talk about the booty as a fudge machine rather than a sex machine, subvert and call out patriarchal norms, at the end charging viewers with "This is what you think is hot."

Amy Schumer's comedy also talks back to feminism, and especially "postfeminism," and engages in intra-group debates about the use of feminism and how and when to implement feminist politics. In his essay on Amy Schumer, postfeminism, and abjection, Jason Middleton argues that Amy Schumer's comedy, and specifically her sketch comedy television series *Inside Amy Schumer*, does not actually align with postfeminism, but rather exposes its hypocrisies and ironies, while ultimately making the case that feminism is still very much needed.[15] Middleton explains that the "sketches perform a critical diagnosis of postfeminism that points to a feminist alternative" and that the series "counters postfeminism's attempt to preempt feminist critique through irony by showing the manifold ways in which postfeminist culture in fact *fails* to take feminism

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[15] Jason Middleton, "A Rather Crude Feminism: Amy Schumer, Postfeminism, and Abjection," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, No. 2 (2017): 121-140.

into account."[16] Moreover, *Inside Amy Schumer* reveals postfeminism to actually be pretty similar to patriarchy, often reinforcing and advancing patriarchal norms and goals. Whereas patriarchal society, and also postfeminist ideology, promotes feminism as abject and crude, Middleton shows how Schumer works to expose postfeminism (and patriarchy) as producers of abjection, effectively "correcting" our misconceptions and showing us the "realities" of postfeminist patriarchy.[17]

"Girl You Don't Need Makeup" (*Inside Amy Schumer)*

Inside Amy Schumer tackles beauty culture and exposes the double standards of the no-makeup movement that claim to embrace women's "nature" beauty, but really only certain women who are already "naturally" the kind of "pretty" that men like. The sketch reveals the hypocrisy and limitations of a movement that claims to be about empowering women, but tends to still look to men for validation and approval. The parody of boy band music and music videos, combined with Schumer's camping of beauty through her performance and the grotesque, clown-like makeup when she finally puts makeup back on after the boys are horrified by her makeup free face, shows a disconnect not only in the messages, marketing, and commodification of women's empowerment and body/beauty positivity, but also a disconnect between beauty culture, and by extension make up and the no-makeup movement, and what constitutes beauty versus hideous, ugly, monstrous. What ends up looking monstrous and horrifying is the makeup that Schumer puts on her face. And the reason she applies it in the first place is

[16] Ibid., 125.
[17] Ibid., 130.

because she was pressured by and trying to appease the boys were horrified by her natural, makeup-free face. By the end of the video it is apparent that there is more at stake than women's empowerment; the boys' masculinity is actually what is driving their "support" of Amy, and by extension, all women. At one moment near the end, two of the boys are playing with Amy's hair brush and makeup brush, holding them in front of their groins pretending they are mock penises and using them as swords to "fight" each other. While Amy is busy campily "clowning" herself up, per their insistence, it becomes clear this is not about her empowerment, but theirs.

"This Is Not A Feminist Song" (*Saturday Night Live*)

This sketch aired in 2016 during SNL's 41st season with guest host Ariana Grande. The sketch speaks to the frustrations of "feminist political correctness" and the difficulty in trying to make feminist art. Ironically titled "This is Not A Feminist Song," the women in the sketch spend the majority of the song defensively justifying why they are not writing a feminist song. Ultimately, after listing all the reasons it's not feminist, the women have a realization and come to a new understanding about what feminism entails, finally concluding that the song was actually feminist all along.

The "This Is Not A Feminist Song" sketch exemplifies the main functions of feminist-charged comedy: hailing and interpellating feminist subjects; fostering feminist community; and feminist pedagogy. Furthermore, stereotypes also function as a uniting thread in feminist-charged comedy, and play a role in the above-mentioned hailing, community-building, and pedagogy. The sketch begins with the women's declarations that "The world needs an anthem, for all of womankind. A song to fight, a song to right

the wrongs of all of time." With this, the song begins with a feminist call-to-action and a response (the song).

The sketch hails feminist subjects through its lyrics and images. It camps feminism as well, parodying feminist clichés as we see inserts of feminist iconography and images that are often used to convey women's empowerment and solidarity. Images like an old woman's hands, women hugging, women flexing and doing power stances, the cast of women running in the sand, and playfully playing tug-of-war. It is significant that the women in the music video point these things out to us. They are trying to "be feminist" and show us the catalogue of "feminist go-tos" at their disposal, these symbols that have come to signify feminism. They then walk us through their struggle to try to be "good feminists" and the "dilemma" of feminist political correctness that is getting in their way of actually *doing feminism*—how to use the symbols that stand for feminism and empowerment without reducing feminism to those same images, without objectifying women.[18] For example, after the women sing about showing an old woman's hands as we see an insert of such hands, one of them intervenes and says "not to call a woman old or judge a woman's hand, we know a woman shouldn't be reduced to just her hands." The other women quickly step in to rally around that statement, trying to recover their potentially chipped feminist status. They admittedly announce, "we stepped right into that trap, it's so hard to never get this crap." As the women continue to tackle what they refer to as "this tough and tricky landmine of a song," they realize that perhaps their song

[18] Roxane Gay (2014) explodes the notion of a "good feminist" and complicates what it means to be feminist and do feminism. Also see Sara Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life* (2017); Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999).

was feminist all along. When they say that they're "just women singing a song," they expand the definition of feminism to suggest that women coming together and talking is in and of itself a feminist act, that it is what it means to *do feminism*.

"Vag Magazine"

"Vag Magazine" is a web series that uses camp to laugh with stereotypes about feminists and complicate our understanding of feminism. Writers Leila Cohan-Miccio and Caitlin Tegart co-created the web series "Vag Magazine" in 2010 at the Upright Citizens Brigade. The series's first and only season is comprised of six webisodes that follow a group of young feminists who encounter various obstacles while trying to get their new feminist magazine *Vag* up and running. The characters in the series take themselves very seriously while the writers and performers, through their exaggerated over-the-top characters, encourage us to take everything the characters say with a grain of salt, yet the subjects the characters talk about are indeed "serious" subjects that feminists talk about and debate.

The series begins on the first day of Vag Magazine's takeover of Gemma, a third-wave feminist magazine. Our main characters are friends Sylvie, Fennel, and Bethany, each quirky in their own way and embodying a version of a feminist stereotype. Also working for Vag are Reba, a celebrity-obsessed journalist who tries to use her connection to Vag to interview feminist and queer lady icons for her own personal memoir about activities with celebrities. Heavy Flo is a roller derby girl (that's her roller derby name) who effectively functions as the stereotypical "ditzy" receptionist but the catch is that she's a feminist, and also that, despite her roller derby name, has a very light flow. Kit is

an intern who first appears in the second webisode and is eager to please, a sponge who is quick to absorb and accept the information about feminism that the different women feed her. Meghan, the only person left over from Gemma magazine, is a former women's studies minor who serves as the straight man (straight woman) whose reaction seals the punchline of a lot of the jokes set up by the other characters.

Other characters who make appearances are rival feminists at Cunt, another third-wave feminist magazine and Amaryllis Cross, a feminist celebrity. Vag Magazine is unique in terms of the opportunities for identification that it offers viewers. We are, at the same time, invited and encouraged to identify with the character Meghan as well as the other characters, whose campy performances of feminist stereotypes are recognizable and "truthful," even if exaggerated and satirical. Meghan the straight man (straight woman) but the other characters are also all characters we (feminists) recognize and know. Indeed, as scholars like Adichie and Dyer maintain, there is often some truth to stereotypes, even if they are, as Collins insists, controlling images.

I want to end by suggesting that the double work of parody—legitimizing and denaturalizing—might actually be an advantage for this facet of camp and enable it to do the work of feminist pedagogy. Through an ironic representation of feminists and "feminisms," the parody renders feminism "real" and "knowable" while also de-essentializing it and deconstructing its "truths." Ironic representations of feminism, when created by feminists, acknowledge feminist intra-group differences and create space for critique. This creates opportunities to facilitate the kind of conversations involving critical thinking and self-reflection that are at the heart of feminist pedagogy.

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