

11-24-2020

## Camp and Pop: David Bowie, Oskar Schlemmer, Madonna and Janelle Monáe

Kathrin Dreckmann  
*Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/textmatters>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dreckmann, Kathrin. "Camp and Pop: David Bowie, Oskar Schlemmer, Madonna and Janelle Monáe." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, no.10, 2020, pp. 79-92, doi:10.18778/2083-2931.10.05

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Humanities Journals at University of Lodz Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture by an authorized editor of University of Lodz Research Online. For more information, please contact [agnieszka.kalowska@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:agnieszka.kalowska@uni.lodz.pl).

 **Kathrin Dreckmann**

Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf

## Camp and Pop: David Bowie, Oskar Schlemmer, Madonna and Janelle Monáe

# ABSTRACT

---

While contemporary pop culture is nowadays considered part of the cultural mainstream, its practices of codification and its use and circulation of signifiers are still shaped by its roots in counterculture. This leads to a second order esthetic that reflects upon mass culture and subverts it by means of transgression and rearrangement. This essay argues that this subversive logic of reference is closely linked to what Susan Sontag has described as “camp.” While doing so it not only sheds light on the aspect of subversion and identity building, but also on the aspect of performance and staging that plays an important role for camp, as well as pop culture and its play with artificiality and authenticity. As a consequence the concept of camp is used to examine the practice and performance of artists like David Bowie, Madonna, Christina Aguilera and Janelle Monáe, and finding structural similarity in their practice and production, which uncovers a tendency towards apersonal self-historization which is typical for pop and is closely linked to its ability to generate new meanings out of materials that stem from other contexts originally.

**Keywords:** camp, authenticity, performance, queer, music video.

---

## INTRODUCTION: POP, CAMP AND POSE

Historically speaking, subcultures have often been closely linked to semiotic codification processes, so any analysis of camp's relationship to its era must also consider that era's practice of subcultural codes and their mass cultural ramifications.

Originally the term "camp" is believed to be derived from the French term "se camper" which can be translated as flaunting or posing in an exaggerated, provocative fashion. Its early use is associated with the beginning of the formation of distinct homosexual subcultures and identities in the seventeenth and eighteenth century ("Camp"). From this perspective camp can be understood as a sophisticated code whose necessity emerged from the still precarious position of deviant sexual identities. As Eadie puts it:

80

gays and lesbians need to remain hidden yet visible for so long that they developed ways of signalling their sexual orientation to like-minded people that would remain oblique to society as a whole. They also could choose to be so flamboyant that their sexuality could not be ignored. (226)

Typical concepts that are associated with camp include "aesthetic sensibility, irony, exaggeration, outrageousness, theatricality, effeminacy, and homosexual behaviour" (Ertin 24).

In her 1964 essay *Notes on "Camp"* Susan Sontag has, while still referring to this background, famously broadened the focus of the term.<sup>1</sup> For Sontag camp can be used as a description for a wide range of cultural phenomena that flirt with the subversively ironical, the staged, extravagance, artifice and aestheticism. For her, "[c]amp is a vision of the world in terms of style. . . . It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not" (Sontag 8). She identifies it as something that can be a stylistic undercurrent to "whole art forms": "Classical ballet, opera, movies" (Sontag 6).

What is particularly noteworthy here is that for Sontag popular music has also been "annexed" (Sontag 7) by the camp discourse. The relationship that is laid out in not much more than one sentence in Sontag's essay deserves a deeper investigation as it could be argued that the large number of players in today's pop culture operate in performative spaces that are still shaped by the camp discourse.

---

<sup>1</sup> It must be noted here, however, that this broadening of the term has caused many critiques that are informed by queer discourse to disapprove of Sontag's account, calling it even "rather homophobic and prescriptive" (Ertin 25). There are still a lot of different accounts that suggest a closer relationship of the term to queer and gay practices (Ertin 25–26).

In regard to the discourse of pop culture camp can be understood as an alternative model that exploits the tools and esthetics of mass culture in order to distance itself from it. Camp does this by accentuating the artificial, the staged and the exaggerated, as a second-order esthetic of pop. Cultural boundaries and hierarchies are subjected to acts of transgression and rearrangement. And while the camp esthetic may always include a subversive drive, it does not follow that every subculture is necessarily camp. There needs to be certain defining features that only developed through the course of pop history. Among these are deconstruction through the tools of production, a concomitant fetishization of the object and the use of theatrical artifice, as the constituent elements seen in certain genres.

The present analysis will begin by taking a closer look at the practices of pop culture as subculture, in order to trace the use of camp esthetics through pop music history. Sontag's fifty-eight "notes" on the logic of camp do not specifically focus on the referential logic of pop, so a direct equivalence cannot be drawn between them. In any case, it is the concept of subculture that has become increasingly important in the theorizing of pop and its countercultural strategies (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik*).

In general, pop music offered young people a way to escape the disciplinary logic of the establishment. The postponement of pleasure, as described by Adorno in his essay on the culture industry, was countered here with intensely hedonistic practices of consumption. As Holert and Terkessidis put it:

They fiercely resisted the factory-organized world of their parents and the constant disciplining and oppression of their bodies, and they demanded that the culture industry deliver on its promises. When Elvis swung his hips, he was inviting his audience to escape from the prison of regimented everyday life. (Holert and Terkessidis 12–13)<sup>2</sup>

In this interpretation, pop had become a medium of physical unshackling, offering a counterpoint to the conformity-based mass culture of the time.

According to Diederichsen, the invoking and transmitting of deviant corporeality was an essential element in the media workings of the new phenomenon of pop. The seemingly authentic nature of rock and roll, which called upon youth to release a "repressed corporeal reality" (Diederichsen, "Nachruf David Bowie"), resulted from rock music's particular claim to truth, namely from its "indices of an exotic, individual, non-standardized corporeality, transmitted in high resolution" (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* xxiv). And such indices did actually transmit authenticity to the audience. But

---

<sup>2</sup> Text was published originally in German, translation by author. This applies to all other quotes from literature that was originally published in German.

while immediacy may be what pop music promises, this immediacy is the result (or benefit) of the medialization caused by the central position of the studio recording in pop music—in this way the liveness of pop music questions the common assumption that “the live event is ‘real’ and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real” (Auslander 3). The liveness of pop can much better be understood through a perspective that questions “whether there really are clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones” (Auslander 7), as Philip Auslander does. For Auslander, in the mediatized culture beginning in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, live performances and mediatized events are much more in a mutual correlation of formal influence and interdependence (11). As a consequence, the liveness of pop music is not bound to the actual live performance on stage but can be best described as a result of mediatization—as a media effect (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* xxiv).

This effect, which depends on the media possibilities of voice-recording technology, is described by Diederichsen as a “punctum effect” (*Über Pop-Musik* xix-xxiv), using a term coined by Roland Barthes. This was a decisive factor in the mediated esthetic experience of rock music because the “indexical truth of voice transmission” (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 375) is what generates the authoritative claim to authenticity, thereby promoting the singing corporeal body within the largely standardized entertainment offerings of conformist Fordist postwar society.

But the punctum effect also points to yet another aspect. The authenticity of the moment, as conveyed by the voice in Diederichsen’s analysis and by photography and painting in Barthes’, is not the only central feature characterizing the recipient’s esthetic experience of pop. In fact, as described by Barthes in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981), the punctum is closely tied to its visual referent, and is not just some separate unimportant detail offering some promise of authenticity:

A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. . . . [A punctum is a] sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (Barthes 26–27)

Here, the accidental in photography is also the authentic, which in Barthes is primarily to be discovered visually, but in Diederichsen is located at the interface between artificiality and authenticity because in photography, just like in painting, what is later called “authentic” has

actually been staged. Both the photo and the painting are staged in terms of their framing, thereby fulfilling the paradigms of artificiality just like in camp, but at the same time, they contain what Barthes describes as the essence of a staged gaze:

the reading of the *punctum* (of the pricked photograph, so to speak) is at once brief and active, crouched like a predator. A trick of the vocabulary: we say “to develop a photograph”; but what the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze). (Barthes 49)<sup>3</sup>

The “managing, promoting, processing” (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 377) and living out of this claim to truth, according to Diederichsen, becomes a kind of driving force and thus also a “material from which one can do more than pursue leisure and the reproduction of existing patterns; from this material, one can create what could be called a counterculture” (*Über Pop-Musik*, 377). Therefore, counterculture incorporates not only the authentic, as well as the pose (“crouched like a predator”), but also the “essence,” which lies in the accidental and is the object of the gaze.

83

## CAMP AS POP

This mode of reception may well apply to all forms of pop. Here, the materials of pop can be grouped on different levels, with questions of authenticity and artificiality structuring them on the one hand, while also creating a distinctive pop esthetic along with opportunities for self-identification on the other. This is also ultimately what engenders the subversive power of the various camp esthetics. This can be seen with those rock musicians, particularly the glam rockers, who broke with rock’s performance of authenticity (itself a self-contradictory idea from the very start) and pointedly staged rock as a big piece of postmodern theater. Here, the cult of authenticity is replaced by an adoration of artificiality, creating a turning point in pop culture as the camp esthetic became its own pop cultural mode of reception.

A highly influential example of this can be seen in the theatrical stage esthetics of David Bowie. What is striking here is how these avowedly countercultural strategies and pop cultural spectacles, built upon the

---

<sup>3</sup> The original French text includes the words “ramassée comme un fauve” (“crouched like a predator”), but these were ignored in the 1981 English translation; this image has been reinserted here for the present analysis.

ideal of a free spirit, eventually give way to a more complicated identity politics and body politics. Bowie's performative practices are conducted through a self-objectifying body, one that thereby becomes a flexible code with permeable boundaries. His hybrid esthetic strategies, realized within the media complex of pop, feature a great deal of self-reflexivity and conceptualism, working with a frame of reference that is equally reliant on both art and pop.

These strategies pursued neither the logic of visual understatement nor of trying to present the self-expressive authentic individuality of "real" people. Instead, by the time *The Man Who Sold The World* came out, what shimmered through was a strategy that would later characterize postmodern "performativists" in pop music (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 137), namely a deconstruction of the rock form. In his transition to glam, Bowie's performativity is characterized by an emphatic marking of his own performance as a pose and by the heightened effect of his portrayal of androgyny and artificial identity. Inscribed in this performance as narrative staging is a transgressive positioning that oscillates between Greta Garbo pose, sexual deviance, pop art, occultism and Nietzsche. Reflections on pop music itself are also part of this thematic spectrum. In his song "Oh! You Pretty Things," Bowie sings about the exigencies of a generational conflict in which the young "pretty things" break with their parents' moralizing ideas of body and gender, but he also links this to questions of identity and politics, issues that affect Bowie himself and that he uses in his works.

One thesis this text poses is that Bowie's media esthetics represented a turning point in the usage and production of camp in pop. While the rock and roll of the 1950s can already be interpreted as a revolt of nature against culture, this was then overtaken by glam rock with its dandyism and theatricality, as exemplified by Bowie, just a short time later. The dandy stands in hostile contrast to nature, thereby underlining dandyism's role as the historical forerunner to camp, and with this, opening up a necessary precondition for a productive reinterpretation of pop music: "on the one side an unbelieving, irreligious, dispassionate and even self-serving ability, and on the other side a fanatical bent, for unraveling the product and fetishizing certain components while rejecting others—all while observing oneself in the very act" (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 26).

Bowie's usage of postmodern theory and his intermedia reworking of diverse influences such as the works of Brion Gysin, along with his direct references to Susan Sontag's essay and the writings of William S. Burroughs, as well as to theater traditions like Japanese kabuki and Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus workshop, in addition to his theatrical gender-bending play with signs, exemplify in two ways the citation strategies of camp. On the one hand, he communicates a queer (or drag) subculture, and on the other

hand—like in Sontag’s essay—he makes use of both high and low culture. In his engagement with the social conditions of queer or gay life, which includes camp’s distinctive capacity for empowering the recipient through the unraveling of cultural objects in order to construct new meanings independently of intended ones or in direct opposition to them, Bowie was able to construct his own unique and provocative stage semiotics, which ultimately had a strong impact on the media esthetics of pop culture, as well as on the counterculture and its particular conditions of production (Paglia 35, 60). When Bowie presents himself as a dandy and a diva, this manifests as a playing with stereotypical gender roles, with his expressions then becoming pop cultural codes and solidifying into a second-order esthetic, one that is communicated primarily through visual means before becoming quotable in turn. In reading Sontag, it becomes quite obvious that for her the dandy has no place today, and that in the age of mass culture, the dandy can persist only in the subculture. She writes that the bearers of camp taste are “an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste” (Sontag 29).

However, in this play with gender signs, there is yet a third aspect, one in which camp is a form of subversion (as seen in Sontag) and also a theoretical bridge to montage, bricolage (Claude Levi-Strauss) and intertextuality (Julia Kristeva). While standing for an activated recipient who moves between high and low culture while creating new opportunities for self-identification, camp also opens up a new reading of pop cultural codes.

This is what Madonna internalized in her semiotic play with divas like Maria Callas, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Judy Garland and Barbara Streisand, building upon Bowie’s earlier metaphorological reworking of these divas as signifiers in the pop discourse. Madonna is thus interpreting herself as a camp subject, as described by Pamela Robertson. She is not making herself an object like the prototypical divas did (Robertson 267). In her feminist deployment of camp esthetics, Madonna sets herself up as a performer of gender bending after circa 1983, presenting a parody of male and female masks, as well as stereotypical gender roles, thereby striking a pose between authenticity and camp.<sup>4</sup> With figures like Madonna, Mae West and Joan Crawford, camp becomes a model of pop cultural reception that intentionally draws upon an intertextual web of established references and that propagates itself through imagery. The subversive power of the visual quotation is manifested as an intermedia chain of signifiers, one that

---

<sup>4</sup> It was in 1983 that Madonna released her self-titled debut album, including her first mainstream hits “Holiday” and “Lucky Star,” with videos that helped popularize her style and mannerisms.



is continued forward through pop culture and that reaches back to its pop historical and media archaeological roots in Bowie.

In his stage shows, for example, one reference is to the *Tänzmensch* (“dancing human”) of Oskar Schlemmer, which can be understood as one inspiration for the well known jumpsuit Bowie wore in 1974. The *Tänzmensch* becomes a fictional character presented in three dimensions and/or in a kabuki-like stage setting. In this, Bowie quotes a piece of high culture, and this quotation then becomes a piece of conceptual pop culture, thus wandering between media. On the other hand, his androgynous creation Ziggy Stardust (borrowing from Andy Warhol’s conceptual explorations) is the product of his own personal world of signs, one in which gender is freed from heteronormative stereotypes and is injected into the commercial pop discourse as a subcultural quotation. The explosive power of this usage of signs eventually must have become clear to Bowie himself, especially when interviewers repeatedly asked him about his sexual orientation, an issue that nearly cost him career when he declared himself bisexual—a claim he later retracted (Paglia 90).

But the remarkable thing for the present analysis is how Bowie’s use of camp esthetics has spawned its own signifier logic, one that has since established itself in pop culture through intertextual references, as seen in the use of camp esthetics after Bowie.

## CAMP IN THE MUSIC VIDEO

This particular esthetic is well exemplified in the iconography of early music videos, as well as in their later descendants. In fact, music videos offer an important channel for communicating marginalized identities in pop culture. Before the launch of MTV in 1981, it was music magazines, concerts and films that dominated, but music videos then became the ubiquitous telegrams of the pop lifestyle. The intermedia codes of camp are preserved and archived in music videos, which ultimately convey the pop discourses and signifier systems of their time.

It can be suspected that Madonna was also drawing upon Bowie’s camp esthetics in her own explorations of gender and dandyism (for example in the 1990 music video for “Vogue”). When Bowie’s play with signs is taken over by Madonna in turn, this is yet another step in the wandering of the signifier. Such semantic lines of descent are well illustrated by numerous examples cited by Henry Keazor and Thorsten Wübena in their book *Video Thrills the Radio Star*. For instance, in one passage, they look at more recent videos like those of Christina Aguilera, who “at her first appearance in 1999 still presented herself as an attractive but somewhat shy Britney

Spears imitator,” then made a splash with “a wig and heavy makeup” in Ricky Martin’s video for “Nobody Wants to be Lonely,” before only later acquiring notoriety in a “prostitute’s outfit bordering on the grotesque in Paul Hunter’s video for ‘Lady Marmalade’” (421–22). Aguilera then changes her image once again with the grimy sexy esthetics of the video for “Dirrty” (2002), in contrast to her performance as a sensitive and restless embodiment of inwardness in “The Voice Within” (2004). For Keazor and Wübbena, these shifts are reminiscent of Madonna’s frequent image changes. In Aguilera’s 2002 album *Stripped*, which includes the last two mentioned songs, this citation strategy referring back to Madonna “finds its visual expression when Christina Aguilera not only seems to ‘continually reinvent herself’ (just like the thereby imitated Madonna), but now actually appears in an outfit that borrows heavily from Madonna’s look in Chris Cunningham’s 1998 video for ‘Frozen’” (Keazor and Wübbena 436). According to Keazor and Wübbena, there is a clear resemblance:

Starting with the dark mysterious atmosphere in which the two singers present themselves, continuing with the bold black hairstyles and the visible body decorations (henna tattoos for Madonna, bindi-like face markings for Christina Aguilera), and culminating in the similar black gowns with billowing fabric, used in both cases to flow around the women and conceal them as they transform. (436)

By the MTV Video Music Awards in 2003, Aguilera seemed to have successfully made the leap to the big stage with her boldly provocative pose: it was here that Madonna, dressed as a groom, kissed the lips of both Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, dressed as brides.

Aguilera has thereby acquired an image and a pose that could not have been more closely related to Madonna. Here, the quotations and production esthetics referencing Madonna, virtually copying or imitating her, appear to have reached their full consummation. Such techniques of quotation and referencing can certainly be seen as a deliberate marketing strategy in the production of music videos and pop star images. At a deeper level, one could also see this as an example of *translatio studii*, meaning the “transfer of learning” from role model to successor, an act from which both parties benefit, both the old queen of pop and the new. But this scene can be seen even more as a chain, a wandering of Hans Blumenberg’s “metaphorologies” (Blumenberg), from Kabuki to Schlemmer, onwards to Bowie and Madonna, and continuing through Prince to Lady Gaga and Janelle Monáe, who in turn was heavily influenced by Prince (Murchison 79–90).

The remarkable thing here is how the concepts of hallowed high culture are now circling back to themselves in the advanced stages of pop culture,

just like Bowie circled back to himself through Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*. In this respect, pop culture is always about more than just its music, it is also about a wider ensemble of cultural practices. This situation has been astutely and succinctly described by Diederichsen, who states that pop culture, in its well-considered visual strategies and practices of reception, is always also a hybrid that is activated by the camp style of reception (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 21–23).

Here, it is no longer just about the queer, and

it is not really every time that the cultural object is unraveled and, so to speak, the genealogy of its becoming ambivalent, the emergence of its double meaning, is retraced; instead, part of later camp's esthetics is that a certain form of the double meaning is also actively intended and finds its own shape. While what is suitable for becoming a camp object may not be entirely arbitrary, once something has been experienced and coded as such, then the culture industry's framework for the unraveling of a work and its readability against the original creator's intentions are ultimately irrelevant for the final reception. (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 23)

88

In this analysis, anything can become camp.

## CAMP, HOMOSEXUALITY AND QUEERNESS

Camp as an esthetic strategy shaped by queerness, as well as the intentional double meanings of intermedia references, are characteristic features marking the production history of the culture industry's music videos. Music video references to queer camp esthetic interventions are strikingly conveyed in Madonna's video for "Vogue," which itself refers back to Malcolm McLaren's "Deep in Vogue" and to voguing culture, as documented by Jennie Livingston in her 1990 film *Paris is Burning*, which itself became a starting point for the gender theory of Judith Butler. The fact that Madonna to some extent exploited Harlem's homosexual subculture for her own production purposes, going so far as to out her gay dancers against their will, is finally highlighted in the 2016 film *Kiki*. Her video took the New York ball culture of the early 1980s and commercially packaged it as a culture industry product. This discursive thinking, where high and low come together, ultimately culminates in sampling, covering, quoting and imitating, in that space between subversion and commercialization. In a kind of bricolage, there is a pasting together of elements taken from a music video esthetic that constantly reproduces itself by referring back to a history of earlier productions. Here, camp can also be seen as an intertextual economy of references, one in which the history of the music

video and discursive pop culture, which oscillates between subculture/ counterculture and commercial culture, spawns itself. This process becomes particularly striking when queerness itself becomes the camp object or the object to be unraveled, as was the case with Madonna. It is precisely here that “readability against the original creator’s intentions [is] ultimately irrelevant for the final reception.” Nonetheless, since camp is also always “tied to the concrete history of queer culture . . . camp objects are not random or arbitrary” (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 24).

## POP, MUSEUM, MONÁE

In May 2019, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art hosted its annual Met Gala fundraising dinner, chaired by Anna Wintour and underwritten by Gucci, to mark the launch of a new exhibition entitled *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, in direct homage to Susan Sontag’s essay *Notes on “Camp.”*

The Met show featured over 250 items covering developments since the seventeenth century, from a sensuous male figurine owned by Louis XIV to a flamingo headpiece by cutting-edge milliner Stephen Jones. There were also photos, drawings and paintings (e.g., *The Fleet’s In!* by Paul Cadmus), alongside various sculptures. The exhibition included couture items from a wide range of fashion designers, including Vivienne Westwood, Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel, Jeremy Scott, Maison Margiela, Salvatore Ferragamo, Paul Poiret, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Antonio del Castillo, Yves Saint Laurent, Alessandro Michele, Mary Katrantzou, Jeremy Scott, Viktor Horsting, Rolf Snoeren and Thierry Mugler. The background music was supplied by Judy Garland’s “Over the Rainbow.”

In a gallery labeled “Sontagian Camp,” there are artifacts that can be matched to Sontag’s various notes on camp. It seems that Sontag had been a frequent visitor to the museum, so it had some of the items mentioned by Sontag, as it were, “in stock.” On display are photographic portraits of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, a Balenciaga evening dress from 1965 and even a Tiffany lamp from the early twentieth century. At the end of the Sontagian gallery, relating to the fifty-sixth out of the fifty-eight notes on camp, there hangs Andy Warhol’s famous screen print of the Campbell’s soup can. (Oehmke)

And so this is where pop culture circles back to itself, with the Metropolitan Museum explicitly referencing Sontag, but at the same time, with the performance also incorporating the commercial and the kitschy, along with the high culture institution of the museum itself. Of particular note was the entrance of Janelle Monáe, who arrived in a surrealist outfit specially

designed for the occasion by Christian Siriano. Mounted on her left breast was a very striking element: a mechanical eye that could be opened and closed. Her sartorial mix also included deconstructed tuxedo elements and a stack of wide-brimmed hats. It can be suspected that Monáe has made very intensive use of camp readings in her work. With her 2018 album *Dirty Computer*, she boldly dissects and quotes past esthetics, especially that of Bowie in her own music video for “Pynk,” for which she dons a pair of vagina-shaped pants whose form and design recall Bowie’s 1973 jumpsuit by Kansai Yamamoto, thereby also referencing back to Oskar Schlemmer’s *Tänzerensch.*

With her earlier work, as well, Monáe has championed the use of quotation and appropriation and the continued elaboration of visual esthetics from media history, which is perhaps why her musical *oeuvre* has so often been featured in Sunday arts supplements. Her output has been the object of scholarly study since at least 2008, as a hybrid media esthetic particularly working with film history:

Since releasing the EP *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* in 2008, the popular recording artist Janelle Monáe has been an adventurous and enigmatic performer, blending and mixing a variety of styles and genres, from early rock and roll to psychedelic music, from classical to funk. Along with her Atlanta-based arts collective, the Wondaland Arts Society, Monáe combines these sounds with wide-ranging concept albums, music videos, and stage shows to create sci-fi and futuristic themes that deal with androids, outer space, and the malleability of the very concept of “the human.” (Valnes 29)

Monáe also works with discourses that explicitly engage with theoretical explorations of campy visual esthetics, and that are tied to queerness and the question of gender:

The playfulness and wit in Monáe’s response serves to highlight the gendered nature of the discourse surrounding her work, as well as the way that she critiques the very gendered politics of the musical genres she performs. By drawing attention to her physical appearance—through the reference to her eyelash length—she also highlights what reviewers and scholars by and large do not discuss: the music, and how her message is conveyed in and through it. Implied in her response is the idea that the message is not solely in her appearance, or . . . the lyrics. Rather, her message is conveyed through the ways these elements are combined with her approach to sound organization. (Valnes 3)

As can be seen, camp circles back to itself in pop, and also becomes particularly significant when art and pop are framed together as recently seen at the Met Gala—but camp is always more than just exaggeration or kitsch.

The play with these signs, as a repeatedly recurring “sign of the sign” (Fischer-Lichte 52), is the decisive mark of a media esthetic that seems to have always been rooted in theater and that has clearly not forgotten queerness. Since pop is always more than just its music, that it also includes its poses, hairstyles, images, texts, posters, gestures and attitudes, the material play with these signs is not only tied to pop culture, but also imagines a broader stage, one that has its own politics and media esthetics, which themselves always also point back to their own histories.

Therefore, it is possible to draw clear lines of descent from the early history of the music video all the way through to the latest public performances and spectacles, be they at the museum, on the stage or in other media, and to understand this complex as its own ensemble of references comprising a new history of the music video and its associated media. What is fascinating here is how pop culture, especially with music videos, not only reconstructs its iconological treasures, but also cultivates, archives, reflects and restages its own performances of itself. This is precisely why Janelle Monáe, in a citation logic situated between Bowie, Prince and Madonna, can always be related to other pop cultural expressions in the age of digital media. Pop culture is thus an ensemble of gestures that are recorded and re-enacted through media technology—one could say, a *Pathosformel* that only emerged through a media engagement with camp.<sup>5</sup>

#### WORKS CITED

- Auslander, Philip. *Liveness. Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Oxon: Routledge, 2008. Print. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203938133>
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.
- Becker, Colleen. “Aby Warburg’s *Pathosformel* as Methodological Paradigm.” *Journal of Art Historiography* 9 (2013): 1–25. Print.
- Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Trans. Robert Savage. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010. Print. <https://doi.org/10.7591/j.ctt7v7cn>
- “Camp.” *Etymonline.com*. Online Etymology Dictionary. Web. 7 Sep. 2020.
- Diederichsen, Diedrich. “Nachruf David Bowie: Wir selbst waren gemeint.” *Zeit.de*. Zeit Online 14 Jan. 2016. Web. 1 Apr. 2019.
- Diederichsen, Diedrich. *Über Pop-Musik*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2014. Print. [https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846757673\\_011](https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846757673_011)

<sup>5</sup> *Pathosformel* or “pathos formula” is a term coined by Aby Warburg, referring to an “emotionally charged visual trope” that recurs through the course of art history—see Becker.

- Eadie, William F. "In Plain Sight: Gay and Lesbian Communication and Culture." *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*. Ed. Larry A. Samovar et al. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.
- Ertin, Serkan. *Hollinghurst, Camp and Closet*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2018. Print.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *Semiotik des Theaters*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1983. Print.
- Holert, Tom, and Mark Terkessidis. "Einführung in den Mainstream der Minderheiten." *Mainstream der Minderheiten: Pop in der Kontrollgesellschaft*. Ed. Tom Holert and Mark Terkessidis. Berlin: Ed. ID-Archiv, 1996. 5–19. Print.
- Keazor, Henry, and Thorsten Wübbena. *Video Thrills the Radio Star*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007. Print.
- Murchison, Gayle. "Let's Flip It! Quare Emancipations: Black Queer Traditions, Afrofuturisms, Janelle Monáe to Labelle." *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 22 (2018): 79–90. Web. 7 Sep. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2018.0008>
- Oehmke, Philipp. "Wer oder was ist Camp?" *Spiegel.de*. Spiegel Online 10 May 2019. Web. 7 Sep. 2020.
- Paglia, Camille. "Spiel der Geschlechter: David Bowie auf dem Höhepunkt der sexuellen Revolution." *David Bowie*. Ed. Victoria Brookes and Geoffrey Marsh. München: Knesebeck, 2013. 35–60. Print.
- Robertson, Pamela. "What Makes the Feminist Camp." *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ed. Fabio Cleto. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999. 246–78. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. *Notes on "Camp"*. London: Penguin, 2018. Print.
- Valnes, Matthew. "Janelle Monáe and Afro-Sonic Feminist Funk." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29.3 (2017). Web. 7 Sep. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12224>

**Kathrin Dreckmann** (PhD) is Assistant Professor at the Institute for Media and Cultural Studies of Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf, Germany. Her research focusses on Acoustic Studies, Gender and Media Studies.

ORCID: 0000-0002-8385-6386

[dreckmann.kathrin@gmail.com](mailto:dreckmann.kathrin@gmail.com)