Wait, What Is Camp?

The oft-used moniker in fashion and pop culture is ambiguous and impenetrable to those not in the know. Here are a few basic lessons.

By Rand Al-Hadethi



Scooby-Doo, starring Sarah Michelle Gellar and Freddie Prinze Jr., 2002.
(Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo)

When the Met Gala announced *Camp: Notes on Fashion* as its 2019 theme, commentary on the dress code's nature and significance quickly flooded social media. It was one of the Met's queerest themes to date — and one of its most conceptual. As celebrities and designers prepared for the big night, online searches for "camp" spiked, and young people turned to Twitter to ask: Wait, what *is* camp?

The history of camp is rooted in queerness as a means of subverting the dominant culture and asserting identity through artistic defiance. What was once a code-switch for gay men in the early 1900s has become a powerful tool for the queer community to connect, resist with humor, and claim social spaces once denied to them. Commonly defined as "deliberately exaggerated and theatrical behavior or style," the term is often oversimplified as "so bad, it's good." Camp finds the seriousness in the silly and vice versa. At its core, camp rejects neutrality — it defies traditional norms, and that's why some consider it "ugly."



RuPaul appears in *Wigstock: The Movie*, 1995. (United Archives GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo)

Camp first appeared during the Victorian era in East London, later trickling into pop culture and evolving into the definition we know today — partly thanks to Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" widely regarded as a camp bible of sorts. Though you'd be hard-pressed to find someone unfamiliar with the term, its interpretations fluctuate depending on whom, and when, you ask.

Fashion, an inherently theatrical industry, provides an accessible and visually rich entry point to camp. Take Jeremy Scott and Thierry Mugler, for example, who poke fun at cultural obsessions and embrace childlike wonder through their exaggerated, over-the-top designs. Or designer John Galliano, former creative director of Dior, who would attend his own runway shows in costume. "Every other designer would just come out, wave, and leave, but Galliano had costumes made just for him to close the show," says Hanan Besovic, the fashion commentator behind @ideservecouture. "For me, that is camp in fashion... It was ridiculous but legendary at the same time."

These designers are ingrained in fashion lore, their work immortalized by countless fashion archive accounts on social media. Camp's attention-grabbing nature is Instagram and Twitter-friendly — but as camp gains more visibility, it risks being watered down. Think of recent runway gimmicks like Coperni's robot dogs and (di)vision's tablecloth stunt. Moments like these didn't add depth or value to cultural discourse — they prioritized clout over camp. "It's instant and relies on giving too much," Besovic says of these gimmicks. "Camp relies on quality and duration. Camp is like fine wine."



Best Costume Design winners Lizzy Gardiner and Tim Chappel at the 1995 Academy Awards. (Barry King / Liaison / Getty Images)

Meanwhile, the internet offers camp an interesting new playground. In February 2023, TikTok influencer Griffin Maxwell Brooks tweeted a photo of their outfit, featuring a skirt made out of NYC MetroCards, with the caption "Sound the camp Alarm!" The response? An emphatic Twitter rejection. In 2016, a similar dress appeared as part of the costume design for the Broadway musical *In Transit*. Costume designer Clint Ramos stated in an interview that the MetroCard dress was in the script and was likely inspired by a campy moment in fashion history when Australian costume designer Lizzy Gardiner wore an American Express Gold card dress to the Academy Awards in 1995. Did those who criticized Brooks' outfit know the reference, and if not, would that fact change their response? According to fashion historian and stylist Gabriel Held, Brooks' outfit can be seen as camp. "Even though it is kind of, like, self-aware and wink-wink, nudge-nudge, I think it's camp," says Held. The fun of camp is that there is no clear answer!

In 2021, some factions of Twitter classified Lana Del Rey's original album cover for *Blue Banisters* — a car selfie edited with what appear to be Microsoft Paint effects — as camp, raising



Moschino SS23 (firstVIEW)



Coperni FW23 (Courtesy of Coperni)



Alexander McQueen FW09 (firstVIEW)



Nicki Minaj attends the 2016 Met Gala, themed *Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology*, in New York City. (Abaca Press / Alamy Stock Photo)

questions about whether the term is witnessing a dilution.

Throwing around the term without understanding its history and context disregards its political power. It's essential to understand the history that underpins camp — particularly its importance in Black and queer culture — to fully appreciate the term.

"Black and Black queer people, specifically in America, have always lived outside the fray. Not out of desire, but because we were forced," fashion historian Darnell-Jamal Lisby says. "Many of our ancestries date back to slavery; after emancipation, we were forced to create our own culture. So, we subverted and transformed elements from what was seen in America, Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, etcetera, and began to create our own culture from what was inherent to our existence," he explains. "The development and creation of our style [in] fashion, music, food, and entertainment evoked a level of artless theatricality (from the subtle to the exaggerated) [that] was extrapolated by mainstream culture."



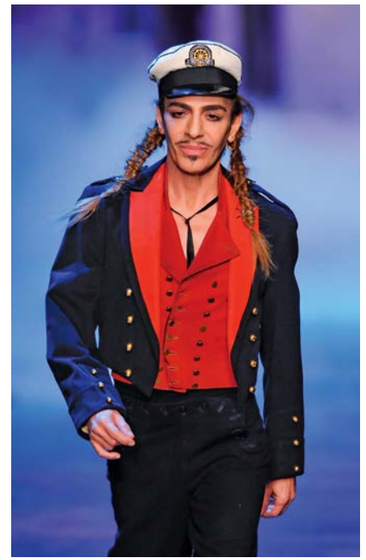
Lily Collins in *Emily in Paris*. (Netflix)

It's all fun and games until we blur the line between irony and complete distortion and dismiss the even larger history of camp. Consider what has been called camp in the pop culture sphere: Classic camp films full of theatrics, like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, have evolved to include the cartoonish environs of the live-action *Scooby-Doo* and the general bubbly worldview exemplified by *Emily in Paris* and the upcoming *Barbie* film. But even when its roots are considered, navigating camp remains complex. From unexpected internet trends to meta references, anything left-field or fun is getting classified as camp, verging into complete absurdity. One Twitter user declared, "A £2 coin is high camp." I'm laughing, but what does that mean? Who owns camp?

Journalist Evan Ross Katz explains that while the term can be misused, gatekeeping what is and isn't considered camp is a "fruitless act." Instead, Katz takes particular "joy in spotting it in the wild."

While debates can be tempting, those comfortable with their understanding probably wouldn't engage in them at all. Likewise, Lisby suggests that the attachment to the term "camp" is adjacent to one's attachment to luxury fashion. "Those who could afford luxury brand goods off the rack could care less about those who purchase H&M brand collaboration products because they're very secure about their place in life."

For Katz, to take camp too seriously is to risk losing the essence of what makes it so captivating and fun. "Sometimes I purposefully call a thing camp knowing full well it is not, in fact, camp," Katz says, comparing the act to referring to someone as "mother." "There is *actual* camp, and then there is the performance of calling something camp online."



John Galliano walks the runway at the Christian Dior SS11 show in Paris. (Abaca Press / Alamy Stock Photo)

After all, camp is applicable across various contexts. In an interview with *The New York Times*, curator Andrew Bolton used terms such as "pop camp, queer camp, high camp, or political camp" when discussing 2019's Met Gala theme. In the same spirit, perhaps we could introduce sub-genres of camp, as Held suggests, like "neo-camp" or "camp light," to cater to the next generation's understanding and absorption of the term. That may allow for a more articulate and limitless interpretation of camp — or it betrays it in the same way as trying to decipher it does (I'm well aware of the irony). But just because there's no one-size-fits-all definition of camp, doesn't mean we should abandon all critical rigor.

The intricate world of camp can feel like falling down a rabbit hole with no end. One moment, you feel like you've got it all figured out, and the next, you're lost in a sea of new-age philosophy. My take, you ask? That's the essence of camp itself — to push boundaries, challenge our perceptions, and keep us on our toes. It's a clever concept that pokes fun at itself and leaves us questioning our own assumptions. And we should be laughing along with it, too — with a £2 coin in our pocket.