

What Ever Happened to Mae West? : A Note on Her “Camp” Performance

Takashi Sakai

I

What is “Camp”? According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, that word, whose etymological origin is unknown, means “Ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical; effeminate or homosexual; pertaining to or characteristic of homosexuals.” To measure the scope of what this equivocal word indicates, Susan Sontag wrote the essay ‘Notes on “Camp”’ for the leftist journal *Partisan Review* in 1964. In this influential essay, while admitting that “homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard — and the most articulate audience — of Camp” (290), she attempted to draw camp out of the context of gay culture and re-conceptualize it as a general aesthetic taste for unnatural styles and artificial beauty. As examples of camp, she chose a wide variety of things from high and low cultures, including “the old Flash Gordon comics” (278), “stag movies seen without lust” (278), “the operas of Richard Strauss” (278), “Art Nouveau” (279), and “Japanese science fiction films (*Rodan*, *The Mysterians*, *The H-Man*)” (285). After Sontag published this essay, probably because of its influence, camp has been associated with the unauthorized practice by consumers of subculture daring to find artistic value in objects that have been dismissed as kitsch or distasteful.¹ (In this article, we will call this kind of camp “post-1960s camp.”)

To illustrate how the meaning of camp diversified in the 1960s, we would like to explore the professional career of the Hollywood movie actress Mae West (1893–1980). This star, who has been regarded as an icon of camp², was famous for her unique performance as a vamp on the screen. As a domineering queen sizing up handsome guys as her sex object, but never forgetting to pose as a sex symbol to be gazed at by them, she walks so proudly with her hips wiggling and eyes rolling, uttering double entendres to her male companions. West sustained this performing style in all of her films and attracted many moviegoers. During

the 1930s, she starred in ten films, which brought huge financial success to Paramount, the distributing agency of her films in the 1930s. Her biggest box-office hit, *I'm No Angel* (1933), cost \$225,000 to produce and resulted in gross earnings of more than \$3 million (Leider 283).

West also enjoyed a boom in other fields: she appeared in cartoon series such as Krazy Kat and Betty Boop; her image was used in an ad selling Lux soap; and her paper doll was marketed for children (Leider 261–62). But in 1938, Paramount refused to renew her contract because of her continual troubles with the Hays Office over censorship (and, of course, her declining popularity due to her acting mannerisms). *Every Day's A Holiday* (1938) was her last film distributed by Paramount (Hamilton 225–28). After playing a principal character in that film, she returned to Broadway, the cradle of her show-business career, and started to produce plays there, starring in some of them. During the same period of the 1940s, she also produced a male striptease show that she called “Muscleman Act” in Las Vegas, and she appeared as a vamp in it. Despite those activities, however, she did not attract as much attention as she had in her prime.

But the 1970s saw West's sudden revival: her image appeared on pin-ups and posters, and it was also featured in pop-art works; her films of the 1930s were revived at several independent movie theatres in the U.S., attracting cult followers (Hamilton 236). She also appeared in the cult films *Myra Breckinridge* (1970) and *Sextette* (1978). These films were designed as comical star vehicles to describe the vanity and confidence of West as an aging actress reenacting her own public images of the 1930s. Our concern in this article is how post-1960s camp has influenced those self-parodies of West presented in *Myra Breckinridge* and *Sextette*.

II

First of all, we would like to examine how West established her distinctive performing style. Some recent biographies of West, especially those by Marybeth Hamilton, Emily Leider and Jill Watts, identify the stage entertainers who had strong influences on West's acting style from the 1910s to 20s in New York before she started her movie career in Hollywood. They are the African-American stage actor Bert Williams, the Canadian female singer Eva Tanguay, and female impersonators in the Bowery.

Bert Williams was an idol for young West. In her childhood, she frequently went to see his performances in black minstrel shows, in which he comically

parodied stereotyped black figures with black make-up on his dark face. Realizing how much she idolized Williams, West's father made his acquaintance and invited him home to meet his daughter (Leider 41). As a girl captivated by this African-American star, West often enjoyed imitating his blackface performance at home, which, as Jill Watts points out, created a foundation for her stage personality in the future (16). West also had so acute an interest in Williams's "signifying"—the traditional rhetoric used by African-Americans to make one word or phrase bear simultaneously its literal meaning and implied messages, mostly insinuations against the bigotry of white society, which are understood only by the users of the rhetoric and its addressees (Watt 14;16). It seems that West employed that rhetoric to form her suggestive innuendoes, which she would later use as obscene cracks in her films.

Eva Tanguay, a female singer from Canada, was also one of West's favorite stage entertainers. Tanguay was well-known for her eccentric performances on the stage: she gyrated wildly as she sang songs in a scanty costume. Her unique performance was so popular in the 1910s that many showgirls imitated it in their burlesque shows (Hamilton 38-9). It also had an influence on West's performing style; for West's mother, who worked as her manager, thought that Tanguay would be a role model for her daughter, and she frequently took her to observe Tanguay's performing techniques (Watts 17-8).

The influence of female impersonators should not be ignored. In the late 1920s, West wrote and directed some plays in which female impersonators appeared, for example, *The Drag* (1927) and *The Pleasure Man* (1928). Through the experiences of producing those homosexual plays, as Marybeth Hamilton points out, West absorbed the impersonators' acting style to echo it in her own performance (150). For the spectators in early 20th century, West's "camp" performance was novel, but it was also difficult to pin down due to its double mimicry: West as an authentic girl mimics gay men who mimic the flashy manners of working-class women (Hamilton 151).³

A common characteristic of West's role models is the illegitimacy of their performances: they were novel entertainers seldom found in the legitimate theatre in early 20th century America. According to the moral order of that time, their performances were entertainments to be dismissed as vulgar or obscene, but they had the potential to disturb that order and satisfy the audience's natural desire to see something unique and novel. Presumably, West used this quality to characterize her performance and make it the focus of public attention.

III

Even after moving to Hollywood in 1932, West made further attempts to get people's attention with her performance on the screen. Challenging the critics who dismissed her act as "affected" or "theatrical," she made it even more "theatrical" to overwhelm them and, consequently, attract the audience. In this section, we will examine West's film performances in the 1930s in terms of "camp" and "theatricality," thereby clarifying West's strategy for making her performance publicly appealing.

Camp demonstrates a close affinity to theatricality. In her classic study on female impersonators in the late 1960s America, Esther Newton states that "[c]amp is theatrical in three interlocking ways" (107). To summarize her descriptions, camp is a style; camp always involves the relationship between a performer and an audience; and camp is filled with the perception of "being as playing a role" and "life as theatre" (107-8).

Among these three aspects of camp theatricality, the second one is the most important factor to be considered in analyzing West's "theatrical" performance on the screen, for her every film has a scene of her performing before the audience. For example, in *Goin' to Town* (1935), there is a very exciting sequence during which West as Cleo Borden appears in the opera *Samson and Delilah* — of course, she plays Delilah — and her aria wins the applause of the audience. And at the beginning of *I'm No Angel*, West as a show girl demonstrates her sensuous performance for the male audience in a burlesque house, and even in *Sextette* we witness a scene where she, who plays the heroine Marlo Manners at the age of 84, sings a birthday song seductively for a young gymnast as she is surrounded by other muscular gymnasts to serve as her audience. These scenes are not intended to show how versatile she is as a performer, for she just performs there in her well-known, mannered camp style; rather they are meant to perpetuate that style by placing her mannerisms before the gaze from two directions: from an audience as a group of characters in the film and from a real audience watching the film in the theatre. This is West's strategic attempt to build up her powerful public image.

Furthermore, West made additional efforts to refine that image by utilizing her private life effectively. Looking at several photographs that are supposed to show her in privacy,⁴ we find her posing in a gorgeous dress in the apartment or relaxing in her bedroom which is fancifully decorated like one of her movie sets. But she was obsessively secretive about her real life: she avoided giving detailed or

accurate accounts of her background, and she did not even make it public that she had a husband.⁵ This is a calculated attempt by West to blur the distinction between her private and public selves. She continued to embody her star persona as long as she was before the eyes of the public, which enabled her to possess a powerful charisma as a movie star and caused her camp image to endure in the public mind.

IV

However, West’s public image underwent a qualitative change in the 1970s. That image was used by producers and consumers of subculture; they changed it into an object personifying one aspect of post-1960s camp, which is the antiquarianism of camp. As Susan Sontag remarks, “many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*” because “[t]ime liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility” (285). Andrew Ross borrows from this observation to develop his idea. He cites two Hollywood classics portraying the grotesque struggle of an aging movie star to make a comeback — *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) — and explains the camp effect of these films:

The camp effect, then, is created not simply by a change in the mode of cultural production (and the contradictions attendant on that change), but rather when the products (stars, in this case) of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to produce and dominate cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste. (139)

In the films, the camp effect manifests itself along with its obsessive interest in what is described as “old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*” at the moment when the startling image of the aging heroines with an uncontrollable urge to go back into show business is projected as a spectacle on the screen to be watched by the audience in the theatre.

Interestingly, for this crucial moment, both films effectively use theatricality, especially the relationship between a performer and an audience. In *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, there is a sequence during which Jane Hudson (Bette Davis), ex-vaudevillian child star, remembers herself as a little girl, dancing and singing her signature song “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” in the living room.

There, a male piano player whom Jane hired to practice singing functions as a spectator of her performance. But it is not only he that becomes her spectator. That sequence makes us feel as if Jane were performing on the stage: an arched entrance to the living room is shown as a proscenium arch and footlights are temporarily lit. So the audience watching this scene in the theatre is invited to feel as if they were watching Jane's live solo-performance on stage.

Such theatricality is also used in *Sunset Boulevard*. In the final moment of the film, Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), a long-forgotten silent-film star who has murdered a young screenwriter, performs her former self as the queen of the silent-film era, so dramatically with exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. Completely lost in fantasy, though she is about to be arrested, Desmond convinces herself that she is on the set of her new film and sees a crowd of policemen and news reporters as the audience watching her performance. The "real" audience watching this film in the theatre is also encouraged to help her play out her fantasy; at the end, when her face is projected in close-up on the screen after she says "I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille," the audience watches two films at the same time: the film entitled *Sunset Boulevard* starring Gloria Swanson and an untitled film starring Norma Desmond.

As we have argued so far, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Sunset Boulevard* are in the same vein in their tragic portrayal of an aging movie star as "old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*" and they succeed in making that portrayal visually appealing by utilizing the theatrical relationship between a performer and an audience. Considering the arguments offered in this section, how can we understand the portrayals of West in *Myra Breckinridge* and *Sextette*?

V

In her ground-breaking study on Mae West as cultural icon, Ramona Curry dedicates one chapter to the analysis of her performances in *Myra Breckinridge* and *Sextette*. Curry reveals the implied messages the two films have for gay audiences and how feminists have responded to West's performances of hyper-femininity on and off screen.⁶ As a successor to Curry, Pamela Robertson examines West's film performances in terms of "feminist camp" in order to demonstrate that "she reveals that feminine identity is always masquerade or impersonation" (34), but she dismisses the portrayal of West in *Myra Breckinridge*, saying that the actress is just shown as "a grotesque figure [which] disqualifies her as an object of erotic desire and distances her from a female

audience” (53). This article has no intention of refuting these female scholars’ reflections on West from the perspective of gender studies, but it does suggest a different perspective for better understanding the representations of West in the 1970s, namely, the sociological approach which considers the cultural influence of consumer society.

The reason for this suggestion is that West’s camp images, which had been used in an ad selling Lux soap and as designs for children’s paper dolls in the 1930s, were commodified again in the 1970s for the new generation of subscribers to pop cultures and subcultures. In 1969, Richard Meryman had an interview with West for the pictorial magazine *Life*. The issue published on April 18 carries the legendary star’s retrospective account of her life and professional career along with several color photos of her. The most impressive of them shows her, at 75, posing among pop art goods featuring her image with the caption, “In a Hollywood pop art shop amid a mod convention of Mae West posters and coat hangers stands the lady herself. How many Maes can you find?” (Meryman 61). *Playboy* also conducted an interview with her in 1971. The interview subtitled “a candid conversation with the indestructible queen of vamp and camp” explains her status in the 1960s: “Taste makers of the Sixties saw Mae as a delicious example of pop art and began to call her the queen of camp—an old word that found new meaning when the dead or superannuated darlings of the Twenties and Thirties became the property of pop posters and late-night television” (Jennings 74). These interviews, which aim to create the camp effect by presenting West as the “old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*” property, tell us that her camp images have become commodities to be distributed on the market to consumers of pop culture.

As mentioned above, it was not only West’s old fans that supported her revival from the late 1960s to the 1970s: her appearance in the popular sitcom *Mister Ed* in 1964 was targeted at the new generation of television viewers (Watts 286); and her music album *Way Out West* (1966) was extremely popular among teenagers who had not known West but discovered her through her music (Watts 291). For these young admirers, her commodified images probably appeared to be a “pastiche” as redefined by Fredric Jameson. In his idea, pastiche is a “blank parody” without “any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists” (Jameson 65). And this blank parody is duplicated and multiplied by its producers according to the appetite of consumers “for a world transformed into

sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and ‘spectacles’ (the term of the Situationists)” (Jameson 66). So, when the new generations in the 1960s and 70s consumed West as “pastiche,” they were not much concerned about whom she parodied and how successfully she did it, but rather enjoyed watching her self-parody as a visually appealing spectacle.

The process of producing West’s spectacular images culminated in *Myra Breckinridge* and *Sextette*. What these films feature is their impressive presentations of West’s self-parody. As one example, *Sextette* has a very comical scene where West as Marlo Manners tries on flashy dresses one after another as a dress designer recommends them. This scene is suffused with many reminders of what West was in the 1930s, including a big swan-shaped bed of a golden color, decorative costumes, and Westian erotic body languages and wisecracks. So, here, the actress is shown playing her own persona in her prime, not the role of Marlo Manners, closing her eyes to the fact that she was then 84 years old.

The two films of West in the 1970s create the camp effect as Andrew Ross suggests by locating her image as the “old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*” property in the cultural context of that time. As camp movies like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Sunset Boulevard*, they present the aging actress as a bizarre spectacle to be watched by the audience. (Its bizarreness is also described by some critics: Pamela Robertson, as also cited earlier, criticizes *Myra Breckinridge* for characterizing West as a grotesque, misogynous figure, and Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* says that the actress in *Sextette* is like “a plump sheep that’s been stood on its hind legs, dressed in a drag-queen’s idea of chic, bewigged and then smeared with pink plaster”⁷). But the camp effect of West’s films of the 1970s seems to be quite different from those in Hollywood camp classics, and it also seems to counteract the dark, tragic qualities of such movies. In relation to our argument, noteworthy is a scene where West as Letitia Van Allen gives a gorgeous revue show in the middle of *Myra Breckinridge*. This scene uses camp theatricality as effectively as the dramatic scenes of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Sunset Boulevard* (though it creates a different effect). In that scene, before the audience, West/Allen sings “Hard to Handle,” a hit song of the black soul singer Otis Redding, surrounded by African-American dancers. She does not just copy Redding on the stage; she amplifies the sensuousness of that song with her camp style: while the black dancers are shaking their hips violently around her, she sings with seductive gestures, which seem to change the lyrics of that soul song into Westian double entendres.

Evidently, this performance is meant to be watched both by the audience as a group of characters in the film and by the real audience watching in the theatre. Just as in the stage performance scenes in West’s early films in the 1930s, even here she changes her camp mannerisms into an entertaining spectacle to be watched by placing them before the gaze from the two directions. Thus, the camp effect of this revue scene does not aim to disfigure West by changing her into the exhausted residue of show business like Norma Desmond and Jane Hudson, but rather it makes her resist such characterization.⁸

Considering the above arguments, it is quite likely that West used camp strategically to achieve her own revival. Truly, her images were appropriated and commodified as the “old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*” property by cultural industries from the late 1960s to the 1970s, but this brought about a situation where her camp images would circulate again in the cultural market to save her from oblivion. This way of regaining social visibility reminds us of the strategic use of camp by queer activists in the 1990s. As Moe Meyer remarks, in accordance with the theoretical sophistication of gay/lesbian studies during that decade, camp has been politicized radically despite, or purposely to contradict, Sontag’s famous statement that “the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” (277). In Meyer’s idea, parody is the most effective practice for the marginalized and disenfranchised to gain social visibility because it enables them to mimic what the majority expects them to become, and to have access to the discursive space and media controlled by the dominant cultural order. So, camp, as he also calls “queer parody” (11), is “the only process by which the queer is able to enter representation and to produce social visibility” (11).

As a precursory practitioner of this strategic camp, though she was not conscious of it at all, West continued to parody herself as a sex symbol in response to requests from the cultural industries. This appears to be a piggyback practice as it were, relying on the dominant cultural order in the 1970s, but it was very effective for her because it brought her into the spotlight again and gave her chances to demonstrate to the public that her camp performance was still powerful and attractive to the audience.

Notes

1 Chuck Kleinhans calls this kind of camp “self-aware kitsch” (183) or “deliberate low Camp” (188). As an example, he cites John Waters’s bad-taste film *Pink*

Flamingoes (1970).

2 Susan Sontag regards the film performances of Mae West as successful camp (282-83), and Philip Core states that the actress is “the most consciously camp” (191) of all the pre-war movie stars.

3 It is also considered that West partly learned this double mimicry from Bert Williams. In his blackface performance, Williams mockingly copied white people who mimic stereotypes of blacks. West liked imitating this performance in her childhood (Watts 16).

4 See Tuska (13; 59; 193).

5 As for West’s secretiveness about her life, refer to Hamilton (6-7), Watts (28-31; 224-25) and Leider (318).

6 See Curry (113-34).

7 *New York Times*, June 8, 1979, section 3, p.10.

8 At first, Billy Wilder had thought of West for a leading part in *Sunset Boulevard*, but he finally gave up this idea because he was not confident about channeling her personal qualities, especially her comic seductiveness, into the characterization of Norma Desmond (Staggs 8-9).

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Films

<Mae West>

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- Myra Breckinridge*. Dir. Michael Sarne. 1970. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2003.
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<Others>

- Sunset Boulevard*. Dir. Billy Wilder. 1950. Videocassette. Paramount Pictures, 1995.
- What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* Dir. Robert Aldrich. 1962. Videocassette. Warner Brothers, 1996.