

“THE GREEN PRIESTESS OF THE COSMIC  
COMPUTER”: STAR TREK AND THE AESTHETICS  
OF CAMP

In 1964, Susan Sontag published her seminal essay “Notes on Camp.” In common parlance, camp means something that is overly exaggerated or theatrical, typically in a humorous way. Sontag broadened this definition to refer to a sensibility which is defined by “a love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.” (105) According to Sontag, there are two kinds of camp, intentional camp and unintentional or naïve camp. Pure camp, she notes, is always of the latter kind. (110) For this reason, examples of camp are characterized by a failure according to traditional aesthetic standards. Sontag also notes that what we consider camp changes over time; what was once too relevant to be camp, becomes campy only in retrospect. (113) Finally, Sontag points out the connection between camp and gay culture. (117) To Sontag, the association of gay men with camp is an attempt on the part of some gay men to integrate into society on the basis of superior taste. (118)

However, as Richard Dyer and other have pointed out, another function of the link between camp and gay culture is the formation of identity politics. Like universalizing identity categories such as “woman” or “black” but unlike those based in culture such as ethnicity or religion, gay men *seemingly* have no common denominator besides the gender of their sexual object choice. Faced with the heterogeneity of queer experience, similar tastes or a similar sense of humor can be instrumental in fostering a sense of community between drastically different individuals. Moreover, as others such as Moe Meyer indicate, camp could be seen to further the non-essentializing queer project of recent decades. Because of its emphasis on exaggeration and

stylization, it points to the constructed nature of gender and sexuality. Through artificiality, camp deconstructs the naturalization of sexual and gender norms.

As shown by Camille Bacon-Smith, science fiction fandom has a long history of intimate connection to gay culture. Take, for instance, the cult gay following of British science fiction television series *Doctor Who*. This connection is due in no small part to the campiness of early science fiction film and television, in particular 1960s science fiction television. This includes two kinds of works. Firstly, there are films and TV shows that are intentionally campy such the 1960s *Batman* with Adam West. Secondly, there are films and TV shows that are intended to be taken seriously but fail to do so. Often, this kind of work is only seen as campy in retrospect, for example the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*. According to Sontag's definition, only films and TV shows of the latter type qualify as pure camp.

Originally broadcast on NBC from 1966 to 1969, American science fiction series *Star Trek* is of paramount importance to TV history. M. Keith Booker writes of science fiction TV in the 1960s that *Star Trek* "was the most important SFTV series of the decade (and maybe ever)." (*Science Fiction* 49) Furthermore, he notes the enormous amount of academic attention given to it, "probably more than any other series in television history." (Ibid. 51) Similarly, Máire Messenger Davies and Roberta Pearson call it "one of the most successful television franchises ever produced." (209) By today's standards *Star Trek* could easily be viewed as a campy show. Booker, for instance, points out "the campy look and feel of the series, at least in syndicated retrospect." (*Science Fiction* 51) Nonetheless, it is typically considered by historians to constitute a serious science fiction text, with analyses focusing on the social significance of the series. (Geraghty 44 – 45; Johnson-Smith; Booker, "Politics of *Star Trek*") Yet, I will attempt to

show how there is an argument to be made for *Star Trek* as camp even by 1960s standards due to its stylistic features, production flaws and generic classification.

### **Early Science Fiction Television and Film**

Before turning to *Star Trek* and its critical reception, I will give a brief overview of other early science fiction television shows and films leading up to and in the 1960s. As Booker argues, the *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* film serials of the 1930s were the direct predecessor to science fiction television. (*Science Fiction* 3) These serials were examples of camp par excellence, and Sontag even mentions their comic book origins in her “Notes on Camp.” (107) *Star Trek* writer David Gerrold compares the Klingons, one of the villains in *Star Trek*, to Ming of Mongo, the villain in *Flash Gordon*, because they are a caricature of pure evil. (22) It is this exaggerated quality of the characters in *Flash Gordon*, its element of visual spectacle as well as its status as space opera, action-adventure set in space, which makes it so campy.

*Flash Gordon* was the center of debates criticizing science fiction serials for being oriented to children. (Geraghty 48 – 49) As Booker shows, much of the science fiction television of the 1950s was also geared to children and, as such, was subject to this kind of criticism. (*Science Fiction* 5, 8) One major exception was Rod Sterling’s *The Twilight Zone*, which Booker calls “the most important SFTV program of the 1950s.” Rather than a serial, *The Twilight Zone* was an anthology series which attempted to address serious issues. Unlike *Flash Gordon*, it turned away from spectacle with its “mundane mise-en-scène” and its “limited budget and costuming.” (Geraghty 31) Booker also remarks on its high production values, including its writing and acting. (*Science Fiction* 8) Clearly, *The Twilight Zone* was far from camp.

Science fiction film and television scholar Lincoln Geraghty identifies two strands in 1960s science fiction. The first, including films such as *On the Beach*, focused on the

apocalyptic consequences of nuclear war. (35) *On the Beach* is decidedly un-campy in tone, and Sontag even remarks on this in “Notes on Camp.” (113) The other strain is satire, and this includes films such as *Barbarella*. (Geraghty 35) *Barbarella* is a perfect example of what Sontag calls intentional camp, which she excludes from the category of pure camp.

Geraghty situates both of these strains, nuclear apocalypse and satire, within the larger New Hollywood project of the 1960s. However, as he maintains, Hollywood was still making genre films with special effects and B-movie themes such as *Fantastic Voyage*, a film where a group of scientists are miniaturized in a submarine in order to enter a human body. (36) Science fiction television at the time continued this campy trend.

In the UK, *The Avengers* and *Doctor Who* are often cited as campy 1960s science fiction television shows. Booker claims that the enemies on *The Avengers* got stranger and campier as the series went along, especially after the influence of *Batman* in 1967, and that in general it “turned more and more to camp and comedy.” (*Science Fiction* 36 – 37) As for *Doctor Who*, he remarks on its poor production values due to low budget, including bad special effects and silly looking monsters and aliens, as well as its unbelievable storylines. He finds the Cybermen, one of the villains in *Doctor Who*, especially remarkable for their “campy charm.” (Ibid. 30 – 32)

In the United States, campy ‘60s science fiction television shows included *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and the work of Irwin Allen. According to Geraghty, *U.N.C.L.E.* exhibited an interest in style that could be characterized as camp, and, like *Flash Gordon*, Allen’s TV shows were both spectacular and aimed at children. (47 – 48). Allen’s *Lost in Space* was based on Johann David Wyss’ novel *The Swiss Family Robinson* set in space, and Booker mentions its tendency toward camp and its silly monsters. (*Science Fiction* 49)

## *Star Trek*

*Star Trek* itself fits in somewhere between *Flash Gordon* and the campy US and UK science fiction TV shows of the 1960s on the one hand and serious science fiction anthology programs like *The Twilight Zone* on the other. Like *The Twilight Zone*, it tried to address serious contemporary issues, and it had relatively high production values. However, like *Flash Gordon* or the work of Irwin Allen, it was stylistically marked by spectacle and excess. It was also sometimes criticized for its production values including acting and writing as well as for its generic classification.

In a 1966 article about *Star Trek* in the *Los Angeles Times*, series creator Gene Roddenberry distances himself from B-movies and aligns himself with serious science fiction such as *On the Beach*. (Page) From Roddenberry's perspective, at least, *Star Trek* was never intended to be campy. The article also draws attention to the expense of the production as well as to the quality of its writers. (Ibid.) This positive evaluation of *Star Trek*'s production values is echoed by a 1967 review of the second season's opening episode "Amok Time" in *Variety*. This review states, "Production values, per usual, were fine." Additionally, it praises the acting skills of Leonard Nimoy, who played Spock, and it says that the acting of William Shatner, who played Captain James T. Kirk, and De Forest Kelley, who played Dr. Leonard McCoy, were up to the series' standard. (Pit) Nevertheless, these articles also contained intimations of *Star Trek*'s campy potential.

### *Spectacle and Excess.*

In naming *Star Trek* "one of the most expensive and elaborate productions in the history of television" the *Los Angeles Times* article opens the series up to charges of spectacle and excess. One of the ways in which *Star Trek* could be considered excessive was in its use of color,

a feature remarked upon in the *Times* article. *Star Trek* was part of NBC's 1966 full color schedule, and, as Susan Murray indicates, color had historically been seen as both trivial and excessive. (4) Moreover, color TV in particular was seen to be excessive in many ways. (9) *Star Trek's* use of color typified this industrial excess. Gerrold comments on "[t]he glossy surface and flickering lights of the show's gaudy technicolor production" [sic], while Geraghty less critically mentions its "bold colors." (Gerrold 28 and Geraghty 45)

Another way *Star Trek* could be considered visually spectacular or excessive was in its use of design, which was overly stylized and focused on form, one of the characteristics of camp according to Sontag. ("Camp" 115) The mise-en-scène of *Star Trek* was campy both in its sets and its costumes. As Gerrold writes of the design of the Enterprise, it "was designed more for its visual impact than out of any particular sense of 'this is what it will be like.'" (24) He gives multiple examples of ways in which the set's design didn't make sense including the wideness of the corridors, the absence of any emergency exit route from the bridge and the lack of toilets or crew cabins. (27 – 28) It is the very superficiality of the ship's design which marks it as camp.

In her "Notes on Camp," Sontag also states that a large part of camp is made up by "all the elements of visual décor" including clothes and furniture. (107) Indeed, a large part of what makes *Star Trek* campy is its costume design. Geraghty, for one, alludes to its "outrageous alien costumes." (45) 1960s TV writers also noticed the visually excessive element of *Star Trek's* costumes. A 1966 review of the pilot in *Variety* makes note of Spock's "bizarre hairdo." (Trau) The use of a word meaning strange to refer to visual excess is also evident the *Los Angeles Times* article which mentions its cast of "weirdos [sic]." (Page) This aestheticism of *Star Trek's* costumes marks their design as campy. *Star Trek's* use of color and its visual design also link

the series to spectacular productions such as those of Irwin Allen and, although not in color, *Flash Gordon*.

#### *Low Production Values.*

Furthermore, 1960s reception of *Star Trek* occasionally critiqued the series for its low production values, including its acting and writing. The 1966 *Variety* review says that it has “a crude made-in-studio look” and declaims its overall production. The acting of all the main characters, according to the review, is wooden. (Trau) Even the *Variety* review from a year later, while praising Nimoy’s acting, also indicates that it was melodramatic. (Pit)

#### **Bad Acting**

Indeed, the hamminess of the acting is one of the things that identifies *Star Trek* as camp to a contemporary audience, and if the acting is hammy the biggest ham of all is undoubtedly Shatner. Shatner portrays Kirk as assertive, dominant and womanizing. Shatner himself recognizes this characterization when he explains the reason he was chosen for the part: “Because he dashes and jumps and kisses the girl.” (Davies and Pearson 216) The conventionality of Kirk’s gender presentation is described by Anne Cranny-Francis, and as Sontag illustrates exaggerated gender characteristics mark a person as camp. (Cranny-Francis 275 – 276; “Notes on Camp” 109) This macho posturing is precisely one of the things that makes Shatner’s performance campy. Another quality that distinguishes Shatner’s performance as camp is something Sontag calls “instant character” by which she means “a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing.” (“Camp” 114) This is an accurate description of Shatner’s portrayal of Kirk, which is nothing but a caricature of himself as action-adventure hero.

What is more, as Lynn Spigel demonstrates, in response to shifting ideals of femininity 1960s TV presented a number of hypermasculinized heroes based on the European avant-garde tradition, who rejected domesticity and often lived in a world almost entirely devoid of women even when involved in romantic or melodramatic subplots. (80 – 81) Kirk clearly fits into this category. Such over-the-top representations of gender draw attention to the constructed nature of gender itself, and they could have been interpreted as camp by an audience of a certain sensibility.

### **Bad Writing**

Aside from its acting, another claim sometimes leveled against *Star Trek* in the 1960s was that it was poorly written. The 1966 *Variety* review blatantly says as much. The 1967 review more ambiguously refers to the melodramatic quality of the script, another trait often associated with camp. It was not just TV critics who denounced the writing on *Star Trek*, either. Even *Star Trek* writers themselves sometimes joined in. The most pointed attack on the writing in *Star Trek* comes from Gerrold. In enumerating the ways *Star Trek* writers overused certain dramatic conventions, he gives a synopsis of a parody episode entitled “Green Priestess of the Cosmic Computer,” which is illuminating about what makes *Star Trek* campy because it encapsulates all of the formulaic features of *Star Trek* which make the series so wonderfully awful.

First of all, Kirk and Spock frequently get captured even though they are the most important people on the ship and should not put themselves in positions of danger. Secondly, their communicators often get taken away and the transporter conveniently breaks. The villain is some kind of super-computer. An arbitrary time limit set before the Enterprise is destroyed creates tension. There are lots of other pointless visual devices to create excitement like

everyone falling out of their chairs. Kirk saves the day by having an affair with one of the female aliens, and American neo-colonial foreign policy is justified. On top of this, all of the recurring characters act in ways stereotypical of themselves. This stereotypical behavior is another expression of instant character and is, therefore, campy.

### **Generic Classification**

The last feature which sets *Star Trek* apart as camp is its generic classification. This aspect of the show is highlighted more than any other in its 1960s reception. In a 1964 announcement for *Star Trek* in *Variety*, Roddenberry's other projects are listed as a cop show, a Western and a historical adventure series. ("Desilu *Star Trek*") Like *Star Trek* all of these projects are genre shows that qualify as action-adventure. Moreover, Gerrold, Geraghty, and Booker all explicitly situate *Star Trek* within the action-adventure genre. (Gerrold 143; Geraghty 45; Booker, *Science Fiction* 51)

An additional argument could be made for the influence of the horror genre on *Star Trek*, not only in the series monsters and aliens but also in the character of Spock. Cranny-Francis explains how Spock, with his pale skin and unavailable sexuality, is a direct descendent of Dracula. (277) Davies and Pearson also relate that NBC was worried that Spock would be perceived as evil in the Bible Belt because of his slanted eyes and pointy ears. (214)

1960s TV writers also address the genre of *Star Trek* itself. For instance, a 1966 announcement for the show in the *Chicago Defender* refers to the "bizarre cat-and-mouse game" of the pilot episode and the "reign of terror" following "the unexplained and violent deaths of two crewmen." Additionally, a 1966 review in *Back Stage* observes "the usual gadgetry, mysterious events, etc., etc." (Loffert) Both of these descriptions characterize the show as a space mystery. The 1966 *Variety* review mentions "violence, killings, hypnotic stuff, and a

distasteful, ugly monster.” (Trau) Again, these are traits of action-adventure. The article goes on to say that the show would be “better suited to the Saturday morning kidvid bloc.” (Ibid.). This suggestion that *Star Trek* would be more suitable for children than for adults ties the series to other shows in the space opera genre like the work of Irwin Allen or *Flash Gordon*, often seen as camp. *Star Trek*’s status as a genre TV show, whether horror, mystery or action-adventure, links it to the aesthetics of camp.

## Conclusion

Although *Star Trek* is usually held to be a serious science fiction TV show, there is some evidence that it could have been read as camp even in the 1960s. This is due to its use of Technicolor, set and costume design, overly-dramatic acting, formulaic writing and even its status as a genre show. Nonetheless, the makers of *Star Trek* did not intend for it to be a campy text. For this reason, it qualifies as pure camp, which is always unintentional or naïve according to Sontag. Pure camp, she writes, is “a seriousness that fails...which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the passionate, and the naïve.” (“Camp” 112) It is this failure of seriousness that makes *Star Trek* pure camp.

*Star Trek* is often praised for addressing contemporary issues such as gender, race and class on 1960s television. Nevertheless, perhaps its achievement was as much in what it failed to do as what it actually did. As Sontag writes, camp “find[s] the success in certain passionate failures.” (Ibid. 119) It is unlikely that through its campy failure *Star Trek* helped gay men integrate into society, as Sontag suggests, and it is only somewhat more likely that it fostered a sense of gay community or undermined essentializing notions of sexuality and gender. However, it very possibly helped create a taste community opposed to the elitism of mid-twentieth century critiques of mass culture. “Camp turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic

judgments,” writes Sontag. (Ibid. 114) Thus, *Star Trek* indicates how a viewer can gain pleasure, enjoyment or value from presumably “bad” low-culture TV shows. In short, Sontag’s “ultimate Camp statement: it’s good because it’s awful” certainly applies to *Star Trek*. (Ibid. 119)

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