



Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna

By Pamela Robertson

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“Camp,” Mae West told *Playboy*, “is the kinda comedy where they imitate me.” But what was West doing, if not camp itself? *Guilty Pleasures* puts women back into the history of camp, a story long confined to gay male practice. Emphasizing the distinctive roles women have played as producers and consumers of camp, Pamela Robertson links her subject to feminist discussions of gender parody, performance, and spectatorship. Her book offers a heady tour of social and cultural criticism at its most interesting, and American culture at its most flamboyant.

Robertson grounds her theoretical discussion of female performance and spectatorship in detailed studies of figures such as Mae West, Joan Crawford, and Madonna. She locates these figures in turn within a tradition of feminist camp—a female form of aestheticism related to masquerade and rooted in burlesque, parallel to but different from gay male camp. Through analyses of films from *Gold Diggers of 1933* to *Johnny Guitar*, as well as video and television, Robertson shows how the gold digger is to feminist camp what the dandy is to gay male camp—its original personification and defining voice. Set against a backdrop of social history, her analysis demonstrates that feminist camp flourishes during periods of antifeminist backlash in America, and that it reflects a working-class sensibility particularly attuned to changing attitudes toward women’s work and sexuality.

Appealing to a wide range of scholars spanning the fields of film and mass culture, feminism, gay/lesbian/queer studies, and cultural studies, *Guilty Pleasures* will also attract an audience of general readers interested in camp and popular culture.

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