

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pamela Robertson. *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996. ix + 195 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1748-7; \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1751-7.

Reviewed by Michael Simon (New York University)  
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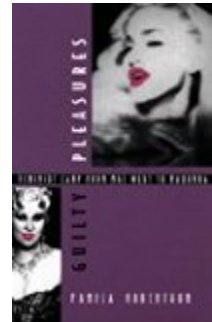
Pamela Robertson takes a serious look at some compelling and enjoyable texts which she frames as feminist camp without denying camp's fun potentialities in favor of its social and cultural work. The theoretical groundwork is laid out rather thickly in the introduction, leaving the bulk of the book for some interesting readings of popular texts. She categorizes different definitions and delineations of camp (the various camp camps), addressing missing issues. "(W)e...need to be able to account for how texts get taken up...in certain ways by certain groups," (p. 6) she argues. In doing so, Robertson contributes to considerations of what is read as camp, questions about how camp is read, and investigations into why and by whom camp is valued. She attempts to redirect discussion of camp audiences as strictly gay and male by reframing some common camp texts in a gaze that is female, gay, or straight: "many critics acknowledge a gay male audience for the musical but ignore the genre's popularity among women" (p. 7). She introduces the issues related to "feminist camp practices" in terms of "oppositional modes of performance and reception," distinguishing "genuine womanliness" from masquerade "which is always social" and which shows us that "what gender parody takes as its object is not the image of the woman, but the idea, which in camp becomes a joke that an essential feminine identity exists prior to the image" (pp. 7, 12). Feminist camp, then, in its creation and perception, and because of the nature and practice of the liberatory work it does, is simultaneously social and fun.

The four chapters that make up the body, as it were, of the text, are devoted to the persona and presentation of Mae West; the film *Golddiggers of 1933*; the film *Johnny Guitar*; and Madonna. The Mae West chapter explores West's work in arrogating her own femininity in the 30s

(often employing the context of the 1890s) in terms of what was long ago described as "awarishness" of her own sexuality and its power; her parody of constructed femininity; her display and use of "masculine" characteristics; and public perceptions of all the above. *Golddiggers* takes up with the characters playing on others' perception of them as goldiggers in order to, well, manipulate millionaires into marrying them. The chapter also takes an interesting look at the musical frame, and the inhuman visual perspectives of Busby Berkeley. The *Johnny Guitar* chapter looks at changes in the public perception of Joan Crawford from war-era feminist icon (independent, strong woman) to post-war joke (independent, strong woman when woman was being carefully reconstructed as feminine and weak). The chapter on Madonna is brief, largely addressing not Madonna but critical receptions of Madonna, particularly as symbol for various ideas about pop culture, camp, and feminism.

While the readings of the various texts in context were often thoughtful and enlightening, the structure of the book seemed predetermined rather than organic to the ideas; that is, the outline seems to have been imposed before the book was written, and not necessarily adjusted afterwards. (Introduction: thesis and background, critical and theoretical base; four chapters of close, clever readings of fun texts, putting theory to work; conclusion.) Most of this structuring worked technically, and few points seemed unjustified, but the predictability of the structure short-circuited the otherwise playful nature of the text.

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