When Jesus, Moses and Gay Pageant Coaches Go Camping:
The Function of Camp in Documentary Films

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When we think of camp forms, any number of examples might come to mind: divas such as Cher or Mae West, fiction films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994) or *All about Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950), musical acts such as ABBA or Elton John, drag queens such as RuPaul or Chi Chi LaRue, television series such as *Batman* (1966-8) or *Designing Women* (1986-93), masculine icons such as Johnny Weissmuller or Victor Mature, Broadway musicals such as *Gypsy* or *Wicked*, and so forth. Rarely, though, do we consider documentary films. This makes sense, for although *Grey Gardens* (Albert Maysles & David Maysles, 1975) certainly has a firm place within the camp pantheon, few other non-fiction cinematic essays can make the same claim. Certainly, some films, like *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1991), take camp as their subjects; these texts haven’t, however, earned camp status. That said, documentary filmmakers do often employ camp aesthetics in their work. This serves a variety of purposes. To show how camp moments (intentional or inadvertent) can serve a filmmaker, a text and an audience, I will look at scenes from documentaries released within the last ten years or so, including *Jesus Camp* (Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady, 2006), *Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen* (Shari Cookson, 2001), *Crazy/Love* (Dan Klores, 2007), and selections from Michael Moore’s oeuvre.

In introducing the concept of camp into critical discourse, Susan Sontag asserts, “Indeed, the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (53). As she continues, she calls it “a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious to the frivolous” (53-4). Let us, though, not misread Sontag’s implication. When we consider the first contention, we can easily and incorrectly assume that camp aesthetics depend upon an overt falsity of appearance, the leading men of *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959) or *Bosom Buddies* (1980-82) looking ridiculous, uncomfortable and comical dressed in women’s clothing, for instance; however, a camp aesthetic actually depends more on that which seems so natural, so comfortable, so acceptable that it accidentally parodies itself or purposely parodies the institutions which regulate its predominant discourses, discourses such as gender, power, sexuality, and normalcy. Thus, in queer (and, therefore, postmodern) terms, we question knowledge and begin to see how we have so come to rely on constructs. Joanne Morreale
recognizes this in her scholarship on the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) in which she identifies the show as “feminist camp which subverts traditional female stereotypes despite its formal acquiescence to the discourse of patriarchy” (80). The show’s eponymous character, she posits, will often “subvert female stereotypes by highlighting their constructed nature” (81).

In * Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Michael Moore focuses several scenes interspersed throughout the text on actor/then-National Rifle Association (NRA) president Charlton Heston. These scenes well exemplify the above points. Long before appearing in *Columbine*, Heston inadvertently earned camp stature: he considered himself a serious actor even while delivering the cheesiest of dialogue (made cheesier by his overly enthusiastic performance style, mind you) in such films as *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968), and he – publically and professionally – constantly (re) asserted his masculinity, sometimes to the point that it almost seems homoerotic in certain films. Thus, he became a specific form of iconic camp which I identify elsewhere as “The Oblivious Camp Personality: The excessive star who took him or herself and/or his or her career way too seriously” (5). In fact, I cite Heston, filmdom’s most famous Moses, as illustrative of this form of camp, stating, “It’s quite doubtful, for instance, that Kirk Douglas or Charlton Heston ever sought or embraced camp status in his career; yet each has had it” (5). In *Columbine*, Moore exploits Heston’s extreme masculinity. He does this, for example, by showing excerpts of Heston’s controversial NRA speeches which took place right after school shootings (including the film’s titular massacre) very near to the actual sites of the carnage. During one such speech, the one given in Denver just ten days after the events at Littleton, Colorado’s Columbine High School, the gun enthusiast, dressed in a dark blue suit, a white shirt and a red tie, waves a rifle above his head and furiously proclaims,

I have only five words for you: FROM MY COLD DEAD HANDS! Good morning. Thank you all for coming. And, thank you for supporting your organization. I also want to applaud your courage in coming here today. I have a message from the mayor, Mr. Wellington Webb, the Mayor of Denver. He sent me this, and it says, “Don’t come here. We don’t want you here.” I say to the mayor, “This is our country. As Americans, we’re free to travel wherever we want in our broad land.” Don’t come here? We’re already here.\(^2\)
Moore mostly shows video of this speech uninterrupted, only occasionally editing during it to – among other scenes – outdoor billboards of Heston in Chuck Conners-esque poses, wearing camouflage and staring sternly down at spectators. Both the speech and edits like these help to belie Heston’s masculinity and, therefore, Heston’s America as mere constructs.

Look, for example, at how the speech attempts to convey defiance but actually conveys insensitivity. It, likewise, equates attending the rally with having “courage” when the speaker and his audience, instead, demonstrate extreme myopia. Similarly, in the roadside advertisements, the actor looks more posed than natural and wears the garb of a young, heroic soldier, not of a wrinkled, grey-haired, fading actor. His grave look in the ads and his overly dramatic delivery during the address seem to mock him unintentionally: he believes in his persona, they say, but he does so to the point of foolishness. Heston’s vision and portrayal of masculinity amuse, for the more weight he assigns them (and he obviously assigns them much), the less weight spectators likely give them. Most viewers probably can’t take them seriously. Moore, in fact, doesn’t encourage us to do so. Besides the billboards, he cuts both during and after Heston’s address to a protest rally held outside that NRA meeting. At it, the father of a young man killed in the Columbine shootings speaks out against the organization. The nervous, inelegant, slightly built man contrasts greatly with the blustery Hollywood actor. He chokes back tears while Heston smirks obnoxiously. His presentation and demeanor seem more “natural” than the prepared speech given by the cosmetics-wearing star. This comparison helps us to distinguish the construct of masculinity (Heston’s posed, costumed, gun-toting, defiant jerk) from the average man (a tearful, ordinary-looking, heretofore anonymous suburban father). It also potentially makes viewers realize that “masculinity” takes many forms – not just the one favored by movie makers, advertising executives and neoconservatives.

Scholar Philip Core offers a list of camp definitions. Among these, we find his most famous, “Camp is a lie which tells the truth” (7). Heston’s self-presentation illustrates this. He dresses in obvious red, white and blue. In his brief speech, he frequently employs inclusive, plural pronouns (“This is our country. As Americans, we’re free to travel wherever we want in our great land,” and so forth). He, therefore, via his sartorial and linguistic choices, equates himself with us and us with America. But, we most likely laugh at this presumption, especially if we see nothing of ourselves reflected in his outrageous, flagrant, ridiculous behavior. Moore includes Heston’s speech in order to anger viewers, for most spectators probably believe that they have the decency not to disrespect the dead, the injured and the
grieving, exactly what he and his audience do. Thus, many of us watching laugh to ourselves, recognizing our own superiority to a long- and widely-accepted bastion of masculinity. This reveals static masculinity (the tough guys, fighting, scowling, yelling) and static America (the country ruled by said tough guys) as lies. The truth, then, comes out: we have long accepted institutionally-imposed codes, such as gender norms and the meaning of nation, codes which, through camp, reveal themselves as coding absolutely nothing, as revealing not truth but a complete absence of it.

The scene discussed above makes Moore’s portrayal of Heston (and, for that matter, Heston’s portrayal of himself) akin to other camp texts which expose constructs (especially constructs of gender) and question imposed norms. In the aforementioned Grey Gardens, for instance, Little Edie gives patriotic performances, replete with flag waving and red-white-and-blue clothing. During these displays, she dances to themes recorded for the Virginia Military Institute. As viewers watch the routines, they may recognize that although she doesn’t mock patriotism intentionally, she does make it seem ridiculous, for as she celebrates America with jerky dance moves and chronic furling and unfurling of the flag, the film invites its audience to recognize that “American” can’t possibly exist as a unified, all-encompassing term, a static category. Little Edie, after all, doesn’t fit the mold of the “typical” American. This can make spectators wonder if, indeed, anyone does? She “performs” patriotism, thereby revealing it as not inherent but artificial. Similarly, of the Brit-com Absolutely Fabulous (1994-95) – like Grey Gardens, a camp classic – I argue, “it is the image of woman (more precisely, the male-imposed image of woman) that is simultaneously hyperbolized and inverted in an effort to shake up the status quo by unmasking the societal norms imposed on womanhood” (12). And, of camp in general, Michael Bronski writes, “Camp is the re-imagining of the material world into ways and forms which transform and comment upon the original. It changes the ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ into style and artifice” (42). Moore’s portrayal of Heston in Bowling for Columbine can function in the same way that these examples do: it can make us reconsider what we “know” about such seemingly long-understood, practically immutable concepts as gender and nation.3

Documentary filmmakers frequently employ camp to achieve outcomes similar to the one discussed above. In Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), for instance, the director contrasts the in-front-of-the-camera personas of conservative “tough guys” – high-ranking American leaders, all – with their rarely-seen behind-the-camera preparations. In such scenes, we witness the likes of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin
Powell, Karl Rove, and John Ashcroft having their make-up meticulously applied and their hair carefully coiffured. In a text which focuses on the Bush administration’s (mis)handling (before, during and afterwards) of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, scenes of this nature – and Moore includes several minutes of them – would seem pointless; however, the filmmaker uses them to great effect: like the Heston scenes in *Columbine*, they campily call our masculine authorities into question, demonstrating their manufactured appearances. Bush, Cheney, and their ilk may promise to smoke out evil-doers, may assert themselves as deciders, may hide behind flag pins and self-penned patriotic songs, yet when an audience sees how much time, effort, and attention they put into their appearances, it may well recognize all of it – the masculinity, the toughness, the image, the nation – as mere artifice.

Quite similarly, Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady’s *Jesus Camp* focuses a great deal of attention on Pastor Becky Fischer, a southern evangelical youth minister. The first time that we meet her, we witness her preaching to a roomful of children. Part of her sermon goes thusly:

How many of ya know that this is a pretty sick old world? This is a sick old world. Well, then, let’s just fix it! Somebody get yer tools out, and let’s just fix this old world! Kids, you gotta change things! We got too many Christian grown-ups that’re just fat and lazy! They don’ wanna give up their evening meal. They don’ wanna fast for a three-day fast or a forty-day fast or whatever.  

During this part of her diatribe, a number of kids begin to squirm in their seats, to look slyly at one another, to muffle oncoming laughter. After all, they seem to recognize the great irony in Fischer’s words, for Fischer looks as if she weighs close to 300 pounds. Soon after, Fischer begins to scream gibberish, explaining that she’s begun speaking in tongues and encouraging her young charges to do likewise. In the next scene, she watches a tape of this meeting as it plays out on a television set in her home’s kitchen. Incidentally, several times in this text, Ewing and Grady return to a similar moment: Fischer, sitting alone in her darkened living room, rewinding the tapes, pausing them, fixating on moments, intently watching scenes over and over again of her evangelizing children. The directors film her in such a way that reminds a spectator of Glenn Close’s Alex Forrest from *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) – arguably, a camp character in her own right – alone in her apartment, listening to opera, manically switching
a lamp on and off, on and off, on and off. We even see Fischer eventually stalking Levi, a pre-teen upon whom she fixates during one of her evening tape viewings, as she stakes him out in a hallway, begs him for a hug, and talks him into attending her summer camp.

We also get to see Fischer’s preparations for her summer retreat, the retreat which focuses on evangelizing the children. Prior to the participants’ arrival, she clumsily takes her workers around the auditorium. Here, she offers the following:

Let’s just walk out, uh, among the pews and stuff and just pray over the seats. Yeah, yeah, in the name of Jesus, we just speak over every person that’s sitting there in these chairs this week. And we, Lord, we just ask that they be covered with the blood of Jesus. Open hearts, Lord. Open hearts! Father, we pray over the electrical systems. We pray over the electricity will not go out in this building in Jesus’ name. Because of storms or any other reason. Now, I must pray over this equipment. We speak over the PowerPoint presentations, the— all of the video projectors and we’ll say, “Devil, we know what you love to do in meetings like this.” And, we say, “You will not, in Jesus’ name, you will not prevent this message from going out.” No microphone problems. In Jesus’ name. In the name of Jesus, we speak that.

She ends by speaking in tongues – perhaps the most articulate segment of her prayer. The next scene of her preparation ritual takes place in the bathroom of her cabin at the site of retreat. Here, she painstakingly prims in front of a series of mirrors, brushing, spraying and teasing her frosted hair into a mass of short, spiky ringlets. She sighs to herself and whispers, “I get exhausted doing this.” Soon after, she takes the stage and makes her opening remarks, starting with, “Good evening. You made it! How do you guys like the hair? The fingernails? The eyebrows? And the rest of me?” all the while posing seductively and talking in a sultry voice, as if taking on a Mae West persona. This inextricably leads into a diatribe about falling into the temptation of sin (“Sin…looks kind of cute, in fact, warm and fuzzy.”) and ends with an anti-Harry Potter screed (“Had it been in the Old Testament, Harry Potter would’ve been put to death!”).

Such moments as those described above demonstrate exactly how camp can work within a documentary. Morreale writes that in camp, “[m]imickry and parody become politicized textural strategies” (86). In portray-
ing herself as chosen by God, but fumbling throughout her presentations, Fischer engages in inadvertent self-parody, much like Charlton Heston does, albeit without the worldwide recognition. In fact, her quite contradictory nature makes her a most ironic figure. As such, she displays one of the primary identifiers of camp: irony. Actually, she displays not just this one, but all of the components necessary to camp, as well. As Jack Babuscio explains, “Four features are basic to camp: irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour” (119). She both deliberately and unintentionally offers these four components to viewers of *Jesus Camp.*

In terms of irony, Fischer rails against the seven deadly sins and against anything which distracts her followers from giving their utmost attention to Jesus. Yet, her primping shows vanity – a fact highlighted when she inexplicably draws attention to her hair, nails and make-up during her introductory remarks. (These do, of course, evoke humor – one of Babuscio’s listed features – a by-product, I argue, simultaneously sought out and undesired by her, for she wants her audience relaxed and engaged through the evocation of laughter but doesn’t want it laughing at Becky Fischer: spectacle.) And, similarly, her girth reveals that while she may admonish those adults who don’t fast, she also doesn’t seemingly “practice what she preaches.” In a most ironic moment, the filmmakers highlight what we might label her gluttony: towards the end of the text, Fischer drives along a highway and comments, “I love America. I love the American lifestyle. I love being a part of the twenty-first century. I wake up every day excited about what I’m gonna do.” As she makes this proclamation, she stops at a red light and gazes out of her window while smiling. Ewing and Grady cut to what she smiles at: roadside neon signs enticing drivers to pull over to a Burger King, a KFC, a Chinese restaurant, a rest stop, a Perkins. The film, therefore, equates “America,” “the twenty-first century” and waking “up every day excited about what [she’s] gonna do” with one activity only: eating. As such, it hyperbolizes Fischer’s hypocrisy.

Fischer’s bleached hair, loud clothing and large size also provide the film’s spectators with another camp feature: aestheticism. Most people remember camp icon Dolly Parton for her giant blonde wigs, full face of make-up and enormous fake breasts. Arguably, viewers of *Jesus Camp* remember Becky Fischer’s aesthetics similarly. Spectators also see theatricality in her performances: the tears, the yelling, the whispering, the dancing, the wild gesturing, the use of props (stuffed animals, for instance), and so forth. The combination of these four features listed by Babuscio make Fischer a camp figure. More than this, however, their presence serves a purpose. Camp engages in parody. Paula Graham, for example, writes about
camp as “expressing the disruptive distance of estranged subjectivity and revealing culture as a construction of dominance” (170), while Bronski contends that “camp changes the real, hostile world into a new one which is controllable and safe” (42). Moreover, Pamela Robertson recognizes that camp “represents a critical political practice” (40), and Brett Farmer asserts, “As a transgressive mode of cultural engagement, camp disrupts and refigures dominant cultural forms” (111). As each of these quotes demonstrates, via its parodic nature, camp prods a viewer to reconsider his institutionally-imposed preconceptions of both the world and how it works, particularly in terms of power.

The parody offered by camp comes across through the humor, irony, aestheticism, and theatricality present in it. We can see this in Ewing and Grady’s text, for instance, when after establishing her own aesthetics for her audience of children, Fischer uses a cuddly toy lion cub to demonstrate just how attractive sin and temptation often look. This makes viewers recognize that she has worked to make herself look attractive, thereby inadvertently equating herself with that wolf-in-sheep’s clothing known as temptation. She, thus, accidentally reveals herself (and, therefore, her belief system) as constructed, like the stuffed lion, like disguised sin, like her own dyed hair.

Notice, though, that the target of camp parody need not suffer from the effects of that parody. After all, “camp can be – and often is – an outlet of empowerment and a call for social change (albeit gently so)” (Schuyler 4, emphasis added), and “while camp advocates the dissolution of hard and inflexible moral rules, it pleads, too, for a morality of sympathy” (Babuscio 120, emphasis added). Therefore, we don’t necessarily hate Fischer or Heston; instead, we come to see them as misguided but well-intentioned, nonetheless. In fact, we might actually come to see subjects like Fischer and Heston as symbols of their respective institutions, leading us to question – even to dislike – the institutions which they represent. We can, thus, come to see the gun lobby, the religious right and George W. Bush’s cabinet as the rightful targets in their individual films and come to see the Fischers and Hestons of the world as mere pawns, worthy of our sympathy and unaware of how utterly foolish they appear.

In fact, we might well argue that since camp exists (as Umberto Eco would likely recognize) as an open text, Fischer, Heston and their peers in parody might well revel in the power afforded them via the medium of documentary itself. Their films give them platforms, after all. And, let’s face it: subjects never likely cringe at their portrayals in these texts. As I recall, incidentally, evangelical leaders did the morning talk show rounds to praise
and to promote *Jesus Camp* during its initial theatrical run, which shows that they embraced the film, for through its open-endedness, they read it differently than, say, I do. Certainly, comments about *Jesus Camp* on Fischer’s website\(^8\) suggest that some spectators identify the film as an accurate and valuable portrayal of Fischer’s mission, a mission which they wholly support. One can likewise argue that Moore’s inclusion of Heston in *Columbine* actually strengthened the actor’s position among gun enthusiasts. Remember: camp, like any genre, exists as a *reading strategy*. So, a documentarian can invite us to interpret a scene as camp, but viewers may reject that invitation outright, instead viewing the section in question through their own lenses and with their own predispositions shaping their opinions. Just as someone need not find a joke funny, a reader need not recognize or embrace a text’s camp potential.

We might note, too, that Michael Moore himself comes off as a camp figure in his films. Camp focuses on excessiveness, such as the hyperbolized female star, camp readings of whom Farmer surmises, “stress the way these star-images present enactments of gender and sexuality that exceed the culturally legitimized script of ‘appropriate’ femininity” (133). In texts like *Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore goes to extraordinary lengths to come off as “an everyman”: he wears wrinkled, disheveled clothing and tattered baseball caps, often appears unshaven, carries around an enormous amount of extra weight on his frame, doesn’t try to hide his midwestern twang when he speaks. He, therefore, hyperbolizes his own ordinariness. Yet, he simultaneously allows us to see all of this as a mask, for the average person doesn’t normally schmooze with senators, breakfast with Charlton Heston in the actor’s pool house, have widespread name recognition, get redressed by a sitting U.S. president on a convention floor, or make heavily-marketed, award-winning box office hits. Therefore, the likes of Heston, Bush, and Cheney may not see themselves as so badly skewered if they can equally revel in the portrayal of Moore himself as, at least in part, the butt of the parody. If so, then such a text – such an *open* text – likely empowers those who see themselves (or those with whom they identify) as better-than the likes of Michael Moore. (And, as a multiplicity of press discourses shows, many of Moore’s detractors, such as the pundits whom one might see on *Fox News*, do, indeed, regard themselves as superior to the rumpled, comical everyman he portrays in his texts.) The aesthetics, irony, humor, and theatricality employed by Moore in his own self-portrait therefore make him camp – albeit purposely so – hence softening the films’ indictment of their primarily parodied figures (Heston, etc).
Thus far, I have seemingly avoided discussing camp’s appeal to gay men. Most critics who discuss camp acknowledge this factor. For example, Richard Dyer posits, “All the images and words of the society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality. Camp is the one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man” (110); Babuscio explains, “The link with gayness is established when the camp aspect of an individual or thing is identified as such by a gay sensibility” (119); and Bronski argues, “Camp was and is a way for gay men to re-imagine the world around them. It exaggerates and therefore diffuses real threats” (42). Each – and many others – makes the right point in the wrong way: they all limit camp as solely the domain of the male homosexual, a huge error, for as we have seen in this essay alone, camp can and does have built-in appeal for anyone othered via the imposition of institutional discourse. Camp doesn’t “gay”; it queers. Moe Meyer, therefore, gets to the heart of this issue when he writes, “Camp is political; Camp is solely a queer (and/or sometimes gay and lesbian) discourse; and Camp embodies a specifically queer cultural critique” (1).

How, then, do scholars define “a specifically queer cultural critique”? Briefly explained, queerness destabilizes heteronormativity, upends definitional determinacy and power, portrays all identities as existing with regularity as opposed to subculturally or marginally, questions discourse, and presents identity as fluid. Same-sex oriented peoples, then, respond to queer texts because such texts do away with the concept of a limited number of accepted norms. Instead, these texts normalize all concepts without stabilizing any. Hence, anyone – not just gay males – regularly judged as “outside the norm” has great reason to gravitate towards camp.

Look, for example, at the documentary films Crazy/Love and Living Dolls. Each offers a queer reading made possible by its implementation of camp practices. Even though it centers on a heterosexual couple, Crazy/Love actually queers the institutions of heterosexual love and marriage. In this text, director Dan Klores focuses on the tumultuous relationship between Burt and Linda Pugach: an obsessed Burt, jilted by his girlfriend, Linda Riss, hired thugs who successfully blinded and disfigured her; upon his release from jail, he once again courted Linda and eventually married her. They remain married to this day. By all accounts – and Klores’ film offers many – they never should’ve dated in the first place: by her own admission, beautiful Linda found Burt odd, terribly unattractive and dangerously controlling. Her friends and family felt the same way, as multiple testimonials indicate. Even after they wed, Burt continued to engage in extramarital love affairs which resulted in media scandals and high-profile lawsuits. Klores hyperbolizes the campy nature of this couple. Linda wears
giant, jeweled dark glasses and even bigger wigs; Burt has disconcertingly crooked teeth and pointy features. In focusing on these physical traits, as well as on Linda’s propensity towards smoking and cursing, Klores provides not only aesthetics but irony as well (since we must ask, “How did these two – one described as resembling a young Elizabeth Taylor, the other as rivaling the devil in hideousness – ever get together?”). Needless to say, the story itself and its various tellers provide camp’s requisite theatricality and humor. And, the fact that Burt and Linda stay together – seemingly happily, no less – provides the text’s greatest irony.

This text, then, invites spectators to question love and marriage. Both Burt and Linda come off, as the title indicates, as “crazy,” yet their marriage, by all accounts, appears even more normal than most. The story itself, as well as its main characters, queer the institution of marriage, thereby existing as unintentional camp; however, by adding his own camp touches to the text, Klores further reveals love and marriage – like Heston’s masculinity, Bush’s America and Fischer’s Christianity – as mere constructs. He does this primarily through his use of music. Throughout, he underscores this story with such seemingly romantic ballads as “Linda,” “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me,” “Poison Ivy,” “You Call It Madness (But I Call It Love),” “I Put a Spell on You,” and “Black Is Black.” Each one intends to show the sweetness and romance of love, but used in this context, each reveals love as a dangerous obsession and parodies entertainment media (music, in particular) as institutions which help to promote and to construct this phenomenon called love, imposing it and its meanings on us ad nauseam. The film ends with a campy one-two punch along these lines. First, in its last scene, Mr. and Mrs. Pugach slow dance to a song especially composed for the film, a song which contains such lines as “Baby, do you know what you did today?” and “You took the blue out of the sky.” Read one way, these lyrics indict Burt and Linda; read another, they celebrate this couple’s (and, by extension, every couple’s) love. Second, the closing credits roll over Elvis Presley’s “Burning Love,” a campy ditty which simultaneously adds frivolity to love and reminds viewers that Burt blinded and scarred Linda by burning her with acid. A marginalized spectator, such as a gay man or anyone othered within a heteropatriarchy, may well derive pleasure from the way that Crazy/Love camps up, therefore questions, the concepts of romance and heterosexuality: if he or she sees these as mere constructs, he or she gains power via their simultaneous loss of power.

What Crazy/Love does in terms of queering love and marriage, Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen does for many institutions. As you might expect, this telefilm by Shari Cookson reveals the construct
of gender. After all, beauty pageants – overtly campy events which fulfill all Babuscio’s requisite precepts – hyperbolize femininity via their emphasis on a specific view of female perfection, perfection communicated through big hair, beaded pastel dresses, cosmetic enhancements, and a certain exaggerated posture. (In one notably hilarious scene, a mother announces that she’s just gotten hair extensions for her eighteen-month old child, a competitor in these contests.) However, the text further inverts our expectation of gender by focusing on two participants’ parents: Swan Brooner’s single mother, Robin Browne, and Leslie Butler’s fathers, Shane King and Michael Butler, gay partners who have made a fortune as pageant coaches.

Swan doesn’t have the success that Leslie does because – ironically – her mother who serves as her pageant coach takes on the mindset of a man. We see this mindset in the following exchange between her and the documentarian:

ROBIN BROWNE: On the one hand, you’re supposed to be this nurturing motherfigure. On the other hand, you gotta kick their ass. And, it’s— it’s tough coming from the same individual, but we’ve managed, I think, to make it work fairly well here. It is a hard thing to do.

SHARI COOKSON: Do you wish it was different?

ROBIN BROWNE: No! Not in the least. I’m the best dad I know.13

Furthermore, in a scene soon after, her oldest daughter, Silva, refers to her as a drill sergeant. Even five-year-old pageant princess Swan gets credited for taking on masculine (and \textit{adult}) traits: when she tries to prevent fourteen-year-old sibling Bubba from speaking to one of his friends on the phone, her mother lauds her actions by loudly informing him, “Your sister’s looking out for ya. She’s gonna make sure you stay straight.” Such inversion in the Browne-Brooner household both works and fails: on the one hand, the mother successfully supports the family financially, as convention expects a father to do; on the other hand, though, she can’t properly train Swan to win major beauty contests, for in this domain of femininity, her masculine tactics fail her. Ironically, when she hires Shane and Michael to train Swan and to make her over, the child wins her first national title.

Director Cookson uses Shane and Michael in ways similar both to how she employs Robin and to how Klores uses the Pugaches. As a gay couple raising one partner’s biological daughter in the Deep South, the two – by all accounts – shouldn’t succeed. After all, Leslie seemingly has no
mother figure, and the South remains hostile to anything outside of heterosexuality, right? Living Dolls suggests otherwise. In fact, Cookson focuses on the blatantly campy demeanor of Shane, who enacts runway poses and pageant dance routines with abandon throughout the film, thereby highlighting gender inversion. And, in so doing, she also highlights the duo’s success: the two live in a sprawling mansion (one replete with an indoor pool), keep their daughter safe and seemingly grounded, and operate a multi-million dollar business. Moreover, they lead Swan to her first major victory. This portrayal, then, suggests that if women take on male roles, they will succeed in “male pursuits” (financially supporting and disciplining children, as “drill sergeant” Robin does) and that if men take on female roles, they will succeed in “female pursuits” (doing hair and make-up, training young models, nurturing children, as Shane and Michael do). Swan, after all, responds to Shane’s hugs, kisses, and positive reinforcement, not to her mother’s constant demanding, yelling and criticizing. Living Dolls, therefore, shows how we construct gender roles: feminine men can successfully fulfill our expectations of women; masculine women can successfully fulfill our expectations of men. And, also in this text, a gay marriage succeeds, whereas Robin’s four children have two different absentee fathers. As audiences likely do through Crazy/Love, here, too, viewers might reconsider what they “know” about marriage. So, Living Dolls queers the concept of gender roles.14

Do internet research on Living Dolls, and you find that it is has actually earned camp status – not anywhere near what Grey Gardens has, mind you, but a significant amount, nonetheless. As we have seen, a documentary can rarely claim such a feat. Cookson’s reliance on camp and its by-product, queer appeal, I posit, have earned it this recognition. It, after all, has the entertainment value of camp and the social value of camp’s ability to queer. At once, we can laugh at it and learn from it. When Swan wins a crown and gets handed a wad of cash (as opposed to a trophy or a bouquet) at the film’s end, spectators can’t likely help but guffaw; however, they can also revel in the success represented by her masculine mother (who has paid her way) and feminized coaches (who have trained her and made her over) who, together, achieve this triumph. Living Dolls, then – like all good camp – empowers the marginalized subjective in a heteropatriarchy by revealing discourses of power and acceptability (tough men, nurturing women, etc.) as mere constructs, thereby giving him or her the freedom to reject imposed norms and to live unironically. Examples such as this well explain the appeal that camp (in all of its forms) has not just for gay men but potentially
for all marginalized peoples, thus making it a queer (as opposed to a solely gay) form.

From reading this brief exploration, one should discern what social critics and documentarians can learn both about camp itself and about how camp might well serve the needs of a non-fiction cinematic essay, its audience, and its filmmaker. Chuck Kleinhans states that camp “draws upon and transforms mass culture. In this, it critiques the dominant culture” (188). Arguably, documentary film looks to do the same thing. It, after all, questions discourse, investigates “truths,” provides previously unknown stories, records historical events from multiple or unique perspectives. Since camp performs similarly, the two would seem like they possess a natural fit. Yet, with the exception of the camp classic Grey Gardens and the potential classic Living Dolls, practically no films of this type have earned camp status. Perhaps, filmmakers fear that the seemingly frivolous nature of camp might detract from serious subject matter. Those who think that way need only look at how Michael Moore covers such grave topics as school shootings and terrorist attacks reverently, meaningfully, and campily (humor included). As Babuscio explains,

Camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humour, and theatricality, allows us to witness “serious” issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed. The “serious” is, in fact, crucial to camp. Though camp mocks the solemnities of our culture, it never totally discards the seriousness of a thing or individual. (128)

The inclusion of irony and humor (in the form of camp), we might also speculate, adds to the attractiveness of certain documentaries. Documentarians want to educate, but they also want to entertain. Nowadays, potential audiences know to expect campy, funny, pointed moments from a Michael Moore film. This expectation seemingly exists as one of many attractions to his texts. If documentary filmmakers have a point to make (and all do) and want their point to reach as many viewers as possible, maybe they can take a lesson from Moore regarding the inclusion of camp moments. Using a seemingly frivolous approach, a filmmaker can still make a “serious” point – and entertain in the process.

The frivolity present in Bowling for Columbine or Jesus Camp, however, doesn’t merely “lighten the mood” of the film. Rather, it allows for a
multiplicity of perspectives to emerge from a text. For instance, if Moore can poke fun at himself, can reveal his own constructed nature, it gives him license to poke fun at lawmakers and other public figures as well. This, in turn, softens his critique, which camp does. Camp, as we have seen, gently chides people, thereby saving its most scathing attacks for institutions. And, even then, it *questions* institutional authority more than *indicts* it.

Similarly, if a filmmaker happens upon a camp subject, such as a children’s beauty pageant circuit or a washed-up movie actor with grandiose ideas of himself, he should exploit the camp nature of said subject by just letting him or her or it exist, by letting him or her or it – even unintentionally – *camp*. Doing so can help an audience to recognize how very much we have come to rely on constructs as “truths.” This can inform, empower and – yes – entertain viewers. And, in a postmodern manner, it can offer various viewpoints on and perspectives into the same concept. If documentarians want to claim “balance,” then, they need only turn their cameras on camp subjects.

Furthermore, social critics can recognize that camp frequently comes from the deployment of *camp reading strategies*. Babuscio calls camp “largely a matter of individual perception” (119). Moreover, in his work on gay camp readings of excessive female stars, Farmer offers, “Gay camp readings . . . destabiliz[e] the fragile performativity of heterosexual gender categories and open up critical textural space within which gay readers can engage and articulate their own fantasy scenarios of sexual and social transgression” (133). In other words, we need not see, recognize, or acknowledge camp – whether it exists in a particular form or not – but if we look for it, if we deploy a camp reading strategy, then we can become aware of an entirely new set of possibilities. Who would think to read *documentaries* about religion, terrorism, school shootings, marriage, or George W. Bush as camp? Honestly, prior to undertaking this project, I never did (particularly because I rarely associate documentaries with camp). Yet, look at all of the valuable insights that one can gain by viewing the texts discussed here through a camp lens. I, for instance, have come to recognize that we construct almost everything that we “know.” Epistemically, then, a camp reading of a text can assist cultural and social critics, as it can help them to understand a whole new realm of possibilities outside of those which they have long accepted, understood, known. Camp, then – whether actual or found – can benefit and inspire scholars (and, arguably, *all* peoples) in much the same way that it has long benefitted and inspired gay men.
End Note
Special thanks to the members of my Doctoral Examination Committee, Drs. Cornelius Pratt, John A. Lent, and Paul Swann, most especially Paul Swann, who suggested this as one of my questions and encouraged me to run with it.

Notes
1 In other words, critics, scholars, aficionados, and campers in general haven’t readily identified this text as canonically camp. Where no one likely doubts the camp status of Madonna or of John Waters’ films, for instance, a text like *Paris Is Burning* doesn’t necessarily come to mind as a tried-and-true example of camp.
2 All quotes attributed to this text come from *Bowling for Columbine*, dir. Michael Moore, United Artists, 2002. Unless I specify otherwise, please regard all quotes as my own transcriptions.
3 Portions of this paragraph appear in my doctoral dissertation.
4 All quotes attributed to this text come from *Jesus Camp*, dirs. Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, Magnolia Pictures, 2006. Unless I specify otherwise, please regard all quotes as my own transcriptions.
5 In addition to her dreadful grammar and usage, notice how Fischer can’t seem to keep straight whether she prays to God or the devil. Certainly, this adds to her campy irony.
6 Ewing and Grady likely recognize that Fischer exists as a camp parody of the religious right. As such, I contend, they fittingly call this film *Jesus Camp*.
7 Eco explains the open text as such: “The reader of the text knows that every sentence and every trope is ‘open’ to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find . . . . However, in this type of operation, ‘openness’ is far removed from meaning ‘indefiniteness’ of communication, ‘infinite’ possibilities of form, and complete freedom of reception. What in fact is made available is a range of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretive solutions, and these never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author” (51). For more on this, see pages 47-66.
9 Look, for instance, at Pamela Robertson’s book or Joanne Morreale’s essay, both of which assert camp’s appeal to feminists; at Paula Graham’s chapter on camp’s appeal to lesbians; or at my essay on how all marginal-
ized subjectives in a heteropatriarchy can and often do gravitate towards this form. (For more on the texts in question, refer to the list of “Works Cited” below.) Critics who limit camp as a “gay-only” discipline, then, do a huge disservice to both this form and its potential audiences. The error of the writers who see only camp’s “gay” potential, therefore, lies in their imposing these shortsighted limitations on this form. Gay males may exist as the most overt consumers of this phenomenon, but they – by far – don’t hold a monopoly on it. Thus, it makes sense to view this as a “queer” (read: limitless) form rather than a “gay” (read: restricted) one. Granted, “queer theory” may have become widely accepted in scholarship only after people like Bronski published; however, this still doesn’t forgive their unnecessary imposition of limits on camp and its consumption.

10 Crazy/Love, like the other texts discussed here, offers an example of camp practices employed in documentary films. Surely, we see camp explorations of love and marriage or of religion or of politics or of pageants in other types of camp texts (sitcoms, pop music, fiction films, and novels, for instance), but we rarely do in documentaries. One should keep that in mind while reading about Crazy/Love, Jesus Camp, Living Dolls, etc. After all, they exist as documentaries which offer rare but important (and effective) camp moments.

11 All quotes attributed to this text (even song lyrics) come from Crazy/Love, dir. Dan Klores, Magnolia Pictures, 2007. Unless I specify otherwise, please regard all quotes as my own transcriptions.

12 Like the evangelicals who promoted and defended Jesus Camp at the time of its release, Burt and Linda Pugach did likewise for Crazy/Love. This suggests that although we might interpret the film as indicting them, as painting them as “crazy,” they greatly approve of their portrayal in the text. This demonstrates the openness of camp.

13 All quotes attributed to this text come from Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen, dir. Shari Cookson, HBO Films, 2001. Unless I specify otherwise, please regard all quotes as my own transcriptions.

14 As we do with Jesus Camp (see note 4), we recognize the campy, queer nature of these two texts’ titles: perhaps, the word “Dolls” in the title of Cookson’s film refers to Michael and Shane (certainly, a possibility); perhaps the binaristic nature of Klores’ title makes us further consider (and, thus, to investigate) “crazy” and “love” as co-dependent terms, where one variable can’t exist without the other.
Works Cited


