

“The Ugly, Untalented Gays”: Camping the Abject in *Bottoms* (2023)

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In this essay, I examine the film *Bottoms* (2023) through a psychoanalytic lens, and employing queer aesthetic theory. I argue that the film employs Camp humor to demonstrate how the characters internalize abjection, as they sublimate it into erotic desire and actively subvert oppressive structures. I begin with an overview of different interpretations of Camp across queer theory, then use Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection to analyze the Campy humor of the film. I demonstrate that Camp aesthetics serve to satirize and undermine the power of heteropatriarchal structures: structures that abject-ify the queer characters.

Keywords: Camp, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, abjection, gender, queer theory

Mainstream discourse typically erases and/or fetishizes lesbian desire, constructs it as an infantile, pre-Oedipal infatuation, or performance for the heterosexual male gaze. “Authentic” representation has largely the practice of more marginal art and performance (Davy, 1994). While gay male representation certainly is not always respected, it has at least had some autonomy in mainstream media. *Bottoms* (Seligman, 2023)—a relatively “mainstream” film—challenged normative lesbian depictions, showing the characters both as deeply sexual and genuine in their desires, but also as ridiculous and awkward. The film follows two unpopular lesbian high school students, PJ (Rachel Sennott) and Josie (Ayo Edebiri) as they navigate the school politics and attempt to get girls. Specifically, Josie pursues Isabel (Havana Rose Liu) and PJ pursues Brittany (Kaia Gerber). As opposed to their crushes, who are cheerleaders, PJ and Josie are awkward and unliked, used to having slurs spray-painted on their lockers. They find themselves caught into an elaborate ruse, pretending that they killed girls in juvie and now are running a fight club in the name of self-defense and feminism. At the same time, their entire school is concerned about the football team's Big Game. At the end, they must rescue their ridiculous, pseudo-celebrity quarterback Jeff (Nicholas Galitzine) from Huntington's assassination attempts. The film culminates in the girls' employment of their self-defense skills to massacre Huntington's entire team on the field.

Despite the inherent sexuality of the plot, the film is not erotic: it does not lend itself to sexualization by the viewer. In other words, while the characters

experience overwhelming erotic feelings for each other, the narrative does not ask the viewer to desire the characters. Their desire for each other is underlaid with a sense of violence, as the fight club acts as site of sexual discovery for the girls. Seligman contends with the homophobia, but in a comic and ironic way: as the hegemonic institutions and individuals attempt to degrade and dehumanize the queer characters—abject them—the humor and aesthetics render the violence comic and futile. The sources of homophobia are ridiculed (the football team, the school), their artifice revealed. The film employs Camp humor to demonstrate how the characters internalize abjection, as they sublimate it into desire and actively subvert oppressive structures.

Interpretations of Camp

In her seminal essay, Susan Sontag (1964) defines Camp as an elusive sensibility, one that is “alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken” (p. 5). It is a revelation of artifice, which becomes “an ideal, a theatricality” (p. 11). In her understanding, Camp prioritizes style over substance. It is necessarily enjoyable and optimistic, even as it may repel the viewer: “Camp and tragedy are antitheses,” she writes (10). She differentiates it from satire or parody as it does not uphold traditional tastes or aesthetics; rather, it creates its own standards which are, in her conception, amoral and apolitical.

Since Sontag, queer theorists have challenged her proposal that Camp is apolitical and not inherently queer. Moe Meyer (1994) illustrates how Camp is a mode of queer critique, a way to expose the construction of gender and sexuality as performance: it is, in

his formulation, “an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous” (p. 2). In other words, Camp disrupts the production of the subject as an autonomous agent of capitalist production. Similarly, Fabian Cleto calls Camp a “queer(ing) semiotic” (44). Queerness, in Camp’s thesis, is then inherently performative, but not to a greater degree than any other identity. Camp’s exuberance merely draws attention to identity’s inherent contingency and forces the audience to assess their own construction. Moreover, Meyer conceptualizes Camp not as ontology but as a reading process, an epistemology. Camp is the exchange between the audience (subject) and art/performance (object). Camp does not exist in the object; it exists in the reader and their queer subjectivity. This is not necessarily truer of Camp than of any other aesthetic sensibility, but Camp’s role is, in large part, to emphasize that subjectivity. That is not to say that non-queer readers cannot employ Camp reading strategies—or that they cannot be read as Camp—but that the act of subverting normative ways of knowing gender is inherently queer; queerness here functions as an act, a way of moving through the world, not an essential or fixed identity.

Meyer’s interpretation, however, limits camp to a strictly male, gay practice; feminist and lesbian theorists have both affirmed and challenged this. Robertson (1996, p. 5) counters that “women, by this logic, are objects of camp and subject to it, but are not camp subjects.” Such a framework reinforces the subject (male)/object (female), a fundamental epistemology of patriarchy. She does not argue against Camp as practice: in fact, she understands it as a mode which, in its discovery of artifice, allows feminine identities and performances to be simultaneously enjoyed and denaturalized. However, she proposes we should push for a mutual exchange between the feminine and the queer, rather than having queer practices simply make a spectacle of women. Similarly, Morill (1994) argues that Camp often ends up reaffirming normative ideals of gender as it can ridicule the feminine. She states that “since [Camp] expression can only occur in representation, the ‘articulation’ of this blissful moment sutures the queer subject back into the enunciative ties of the dominant order” (Morill, 1994, p. 95-96). Unlike Meyer, she sees Camp less as a reading practice than as an aesthetic style. She believes that framing Camp as always progressive obscures the way it might recreate gender

roles/value hierarchies. Further, such a framing risks essentializing the queer subject, making them always progressive, rather than as equally a product of their environment as their normative peers.

Bringing in a lesbian perspective, Sue-Ellen Case (1988) argues that butch-femme relationships are a lesbian practice of Camp. Rather than impersonating heterosexuality, she suggests, “the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together... They are coupled ones who do not impale themselves on the poles of sexual difference or metaphysical values, but constantly subvert the sign system... into the light fondle of artifice” (Case, 1988, p. 56). The couple overemphasizes their perceived gender difference to illuminate the artificial construction of gender itself. While many agree with her, others believe that, as a predominantly male practice, queer women should not try claim an ill-fitting mode. Instead of attempting to discover lesbian Camp in existing work, Kate Davy (1994, p. 113) argues, countering Case, that “the tools that Camp provides—artifice, wit, irony exaggeration—are available to butchfemme gender play separate from the ways in which are inscribed by Camp as a historically marked phenomenon” (123). For Davy, butch-femme is, though subversive, less about performing the Other to highlight artifice (i.e., gay male Camp, like drag, is almost always feminine) than is about illustrating the range of gender performative potentials. Reliance solely on the Other risks maintaining an ontological gender binary: the performer is always performing their “opposite,” affirming that there is, in fact an opposite.

Vänskä borrows from Case and Robertson to argue that lesbian camp may be less obvious because it often employs masculine aesthetics and behaviors, which are generally understood as natural rather than as artificial (as with the feminine). In her conception, lesbian camp is the inverse of gay male camp, which is based largely in female “cross-dressing.” However, this understanding is somewhat essentialist and binary, as Davy (1994) illustrates. This reduces Camp merely to role-reversal rather than a performance that, in its excess, reveals the audience’s performance. Vänskä points to contemporary artists, including the Serbian singer Marija Šerifović, as examples of lesbian camp. Such artists, she argues, subvert masculine aesthetics and narratives. However, she ignores how queer female artists have deliberately employed Campy femininity. Artists like Lady Gaga and Chappell

Roan, for instance, indulge in the extreme feminine, revealing it as performance. Vänskås binarism reflects Robertson's argument that gay male Camp readings often assume woman as always performers, never as conscious Camp subjects. She does not acknowledge that performers participate in their own construction, thus framing femininity as something female performers naively don, politically relevant only when men decide it is.

Abjection

In her seminal essay *Powers of Horror* (1980), Julia Kristeva theorizes abjection as the confrontation with the artificial boundary between the self and the Other. It is that which the superego externalizes to maintain the bounded self, discrete from the unknown Other. It confronts and ridicules the symbolic order. The space of delineation between the self/Other collapses and pulls the subject into its chasm, arousing the pre-lingual fears to consume the conscious. Kristeva argues that that which the superego rejects (symbolized through bodily waste, like urine, blood, vomit) then "becomes the sole 'object' of sexual desire— a true 'object' where a man, frightened, crosses over the horrors of the maternal bowels, in an immersion that enables him to avoid coming face to face with an other, spares him the risk of castration" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 53). The subject expels the abject to the object, reducing it a consumable desire. As such, it loses its ability to threaten the subject's identity as bounded self.

Queerness and Camp have a shared history with abjection: it violates the artificial boundaries imposed upon sexuality, threatening to erupt the formation of both the capitalist society and of the individual. For capitalism, transgression of heterosexuality means the transgression of capitalist (re) production sustained through the nuclear family. Queerness exposes the inherent artifice of sexual structures and boundaries. Likewise, the individual subject's confrontation with queerness makes them illegible to the symbolic structure demanded by capitalism and its sexual, temporal logics. Kristeva (1980, p. 48) writes that the "normal" object of desire is that "which is, whatever may be said, fantasized according to the normal criteria of the Oedipus complex: a desire for the other sex." The queer subject is excluded from the sexual structures of desire, and thus from the symbolic order. The queer superego attempts to reject its desire; the taboo becomes the object of desire.

The recurring themes of lesbian vampirism reveal the link between queer identity/desire and abjection. The lesbian vampire appears consistently across literary and film history, from *Carmilla* (1872) to the "sexploitation" films of the 1960s and 70s (Weiss, 1992). Though these portrayals often appeal to the male gaze/ desires, they also act as "the agent for female desire— dangerous excessive lesbian desire" (Weiss, 1992, p. 108). Case (1991, p. 10) elaborates that "women and monster share status as object of the viewer's scopophilia and hence the shared identification." The lesbian vampire thus disrupts the subject/object divide, evoking simultaneously fear and desire. She sits in the space of delineation, all-consuming as void, as chasm. She— as the corpse symbolizes death infecting life (Kristeva 1980)— symbolizes the threat of the Other, the infection of the Queer. She represents the instability, the uncontainable expansion of lesbian desire.

It seems that over the past decade or so, lesbian Camp and lesbian vampires have fallen out of fashion. Most of the mainstream lesbian films been understated period pieces full of yearning and tragic or ambiguous endings. However, *Bottoms* appears to revival of lesbian Camp and, while not a Vampire film, appeals to the same desires of sex and power that intrigued queer viewers in the sixties and seventies. It's wide reach and positive reception among both straight and queer audiences suggest that it is possible for Camp to simultaneously address queer narratives while also finding mainstream success. Further, it illustrates that Camp belongs not only to gay male spectators to read onto performers (women): it can be deliberately employed to deconstruct patriarchal systems that create both straight and queer women as Other.

Camp and the Abject in *Bottoms* (2023)

In *Bottoms*, the central queer characters are made abject by the heteronormative, patriarchal institution they occupy (high school): they consequently sublimate that abjection into a desire for violence and power. The football players and school are an apparatus of heteronormative patriarchy, one which makes queer desire unspeakable, exempts it from the symbolic. The girls are pushed toward the margins of the school (the empty gym after hours), made to live under a reign of terror. Their lockers are sprayed with slurs so regularly that they are friends with the janitor; the cruel has become mundane, routine. It becomes an unmarked part of the symbol-

ic order and leaves no room for reaction against it.

Abjection is, of course, not limited to the (openly) queer characters. Some of the most virulent violence is directed at the “straight” girls. This is most visible in the way Jeff, the quarterback, treats his girlfriend, Isabel. She, PJ, and Josie first connect when they have to offer her a “safety ride” as Jeff chases her down in the parking lot, screaming that he didn’t cheat on her. As comical as the scene is, with his dainty jog, it demonstrates how women are excluded from language, from the symbolic. Jeff chastises Isabel: “You’re attacking me and it’s giving me a migraine and it’s giving me PTSD about all the other times I’ve had migraines!” (Bottoms, 2023, 00:07: 22). He centers his own pain, making her the villain. He twists language to exempt her from rebuttal; his manipulation wrenches the symbolic from her grasp, leaving her only with the ability shake her hands and hide in Josie’s car.

As Kristeva (1980) explicates, the subject attempt to displace and externalize that which makes them abject. It becomes the object of desire and drives, easier to confront when it is removed from the self. The fight club exemplifies this: as a space of violence and terror, where the body is the ultimate form of expression, also acts as a site of the erotic. As she explains why the fight club is actually a genius idea, PJ exclaims: “We share. We connect. We’re punching each other, adrenaline is flowing. Next thing you know Isabel and Brittany are kissing us on the mouths!” (Bottoms, 2023, 00:15:30). This plan eventually plays out. As women and queer people’s words are often excluded from the symbolic, it is a return to the most archaic expressions (punching someone in the face) which facilitates desire. For instance, when as a montage of the fight club plays (the lyrics “I can’t help turning my love into pain” playing over), Josie and PJ turn to each other, clearly when watching Brittany (Kaia Gerber) and Isabel fight each other. PJ and Brittany fight, and Brittany flips and pins PJ to the ground. PJ, with blood gushing down her face, can only grin. The erotic and the violent are one in the same: PJ is drawn towards the prelingual, desiring that which steals her ability to speak.

Bottoms portrays queerness as in a perpetual state of abjection, external to the symbolic. At the beginning of the film, PJ and Josie run into Isabel and Brittany at the town carnival, a classic setting of high school movies. Brittany tells PJ that she (Brittany) can’t eat any food because she needs to “pull

trig” (make herself vomit). A straight, normative girl, Brittany attempts to maintain a kind of purity, and stable feminine identity. Kristeva (1980) theorizes vomit as a rejection of the abject, represents that which is part of the subject but threatens the clean, clearly delineated self. It is both subject and object, Self and Other. Brittany’s desire to vomit is a desire to maintain herself as clean, pure, feminine, and beautiful. More literally, her vomiting is a sign of disordered eating, resulting from patriarchal norms. The act of vomiting is paradoxical: while it keeps the body and mind pure, it makes the body ill, places it closer to death (Other). It is a contradictory action, revealing the impossibility of a pure self. Brittany’s vomiting, then, is futile attempt to stabilize her identity as both subject (the agency of self-determination, control of her body’s borders) and object (construct of patriarchy). PJ responds to Brittany: “I think you could eat food, digest it, let it marinate, poop it out” (Bottoms, 2023, 00:05:00). PJ wants Brittany to accept (“digest”) the unclean, to accept ambiguity and defilement. If we read PJ as representative of queer logics, this moment demonstrates how queerness is, to some extent, necessarily abject. It does not fit into the patriarchal, heteronormative system. The queer subject necessarily sits outside of these the symbolic order: there is not necessarily a clear self/Other.

Bottoms contends the abjection of its female characters by employing camp to reveal the performance of patriarchy. Rather than being truly intimidating, the football players are played for laughs as ridiculous and high maintenance, inverting traditional portrayals of the highschool mean girl. Jeff’s teammates act as his posse, fetching drinks for him and yelling at servers. We are introduced to the team through the school’s football announcer screaming, “it’s time to get ready, get wild, and get horny for our very own Vikings!” (Bottoms, 2023, 00:03:43). Posters of Jeff decorate the school, with captions like “get horny.” Masculinity and institutional maintenance of it are revealed as fundamentally homoerotic, despite their simultaneous investment in heterosexuality.

At several points, the film uses religious imagery to reveal the ridiculousness of the high stakes assigned to football and the maintenance of masculinity. After Josie very lightly hits Jeff with her car, his teammates swarm around him, kneeling and screaming in grief. Tim, Jeff’s henchman, gathers Jeff’s crumpled, mildly bruised form in his arm.

The scene resembles the Pietá, with Jeff as Christ. More prominently, at lunch, the football team sits in front at the head of the cafeteria, in front of a mural based on Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*: Jeff is Adam, and he grips a football as he reaches for God's hand. Adam/Jeff's tiny penis peeks out behind Tim's head, reminding the audience that masculinity is in a constant state of compensation, always trying to prove itself. The players sit in front of the painting, arranged with clear reference to *The Last Supper*. Here, religion, historically used as justification of patriarchy and homophobia, is performed as self-righteous pageant, strangely homoerotic.

After Isabel breaks up with Jeff, the fight club plans to egg his house, and Hazel plants a bomb under his car. The camera cuts back and forth between slow motion shots of the girls wielding the eggs, and of Jeff silently performing to Bonnie Tyler's *Total Eclipse of the Heart*. The song is melodramatic ballad duet, itself a naïve camping of heterosexuality. With the music and the exploding car, the scene illustrates the comically high stakes invested in high school politics. As high school is a microcosm of larger sex and gender politics, the scene deconstructs the effort needed to sustain heteropatriarchy.

The film culminates in the mass murder of the school's opposing football team. The scene embodies the ridiculous over-the-top stakes of high school football its implied gender politics. Though they do so in service of the Vikings, possibly calling into question the radical extent of its critique (the film ultimately celebrates their acceptance by the school that has been marginalizing them), the girls reverse the politics of horror that men have employed, perpetuating abject terror upon the opposing football team. The scene reflects Camp's lack of moralism, but is inherently political (insofar as gender is always political). The theatricality of gender and its destruction takes precedence over realism or moral politics.

Bottoms sits at the intersection of the many interpretations of Camp. It is not, as Meyer argued, a purely homosexual male mode. In fact, it reverses the overwhelmingly popular male Camp which utilizes the feminine as the aesthetic symbol. The football players and the school (a school embodied by two men, the football announcer and principal, both of whom are deeply invested in the football team) are the Campy figures, rather than any of the queer figures (the characters might be excessive and fail at seriousness, but they do not as explicitly comment on the performance of gender as they

are seemingly comfortable in their sexual identity). Moreover, it is not "pure" Camp as it is not naïve: Camp here functions as a deliberate tool of satire, rather than existing solely in reading practices. Such a version of Camp allows the female subjects and audiences of all genders to engage in the creation of camp; it fulfills Robertson's (1996) claim that aesthetics is a product of both spectator and spectated (a binary homologous with man and woman). Women do not function only as bodies upon which male politics are projected: they actively engage in Camp and wield it to articulate their own experiences with homophobic and patriarchal oppression.

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