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The Time of Camp, or Camp as Ruin: Vincent Chevalier, the Portrait of a Young Man as an Artist

by Ricky Varghese

Precisely and intentionally because my concerns are oftentimes temporal, and, by extension, historical in tenor, this inquiry suggests a desire to understand—if at all possible—what the time of camp might be. Does camp have a temporality attached to it, to which it might be attuned? Does the desiring subject, a subject whose taste and desire can be quarantined off from one another, as defensively suggested by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, understand the object of camp as a necessary rupture within the context of its own historical, socio-political and psychological trajectory? Let me ask this question again—simply—what is the time of camp? And, can camp be a response—one among many others—to historical trauma, a rupture in the linear course of history as dealt upon temporality *vis-à-vis* the traumatic?

As such, before explicating camp's possible capacity to act as an anything-but-furtive response to traumatic history, it might be worthwhile to contend and tarry here briefly with the very nature of history and its relationship to the traumatic. Following Hegel's account of and accounting for history and historicity,

Rebecca Comay underscores a radical descriptive urgency in how she speaks regarding the nature of abstraction—traumatic history and trauma, as such, rendered as and in the manner of abstraction—“the deadly capacity to cut into the continuum of being and bring existence to the point of unreality” (Comay 77). In what might appear to be of a similar vein, borne out of a similar sense of urgency to make and render meaning to things—objects, experiences, enactments that might be rendered as camp and desiring subjects, or subjectivity as such—it becomes useful to rehearse Walter Benjamin's now-famous line from his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: “[in] the ruin, history has physically merged into the setting . . . in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” (177-78). The urgency that links these two thoughts—thought-experiments, nonetheless, in the final analysis—might reside in a desire to name, nay claim, the anticipatory violence that is to come, an anticipatory violence implicit in historical time, as is the case with Freud's conception of the uncanny,

wherein camp might motivate us as a responsive gesture set up against the aftermath of this violence that was always already expected.

The unreality of abstraction, the cutting into being, the traumatizing of being to will it (read: rupture, into a rapturous, in a manner of speaking, caesura within our experience of time) into some other sense of its own reality, assumes and presumes a violent confrontation with the future to come, *l'avenir*, the reality as yet to be named, claimed, or arrived at, yet always already still nonetheless deferred. In a similar sense, the ruin too is a figure of campy abstraction, perhaps the figure of campy abstraction par excellence, a figural discharge of abstraction, itself in a state of ruin, the thing, living and dying *vis-à-vis* the experience of trauma, here by the way of camp, against any sense of stasis because it can't stop, it won't stop, from moving toward decay and nullification. The compelling promise, perhaps, of Vincent Chevalier's campy video project "So . . . when did you figure out that you had AIDS?"; a comical repurposing of a home video from the artist's childhood, is precisely that it might offer us some manner by which to think about queer life as, in and of itself, negotiating the ever-prescient sense of a time, itself left in ruins; a time that can only, it would seem, be made sense of through the tense of the future anterior, a time that will have come to pass, some time, sometimes, at times, at a time in the future as yet to arrive. This is a time, in the sense brought forth by Chevalier's work, that might only be dealt with through camp's capacity for

redemption from the traumatic. This time is a time of abstraction through the vehicle that camp acts as and offers because it both waits and does not wait; it tells of a futurity that in its telling has already come to pass, become past, albeit in a manner of a foretelling. In a way, this foretelling remembers not the past *per se*, but the future that the past comically resuscitates, against any and all impulse to forget oneself, or of oneself, within the scene of traumatic and traumatized temporality.

The premise: in 1996, Chevalier, at the age of 13, donning a bright blond wig, shoots a home video, which at first sight appears to be an instance of child's play. He shoots this, along with friends, sisters Kelsey and Chelsey Winchester, wherein it appears to stage a scene set within a talk show. Within this scene, Kelsey plays the role of the talk show host, Chelsey is behind the camera, and Chevalier, himself, plays the role of a man diagnosed with AIDS, having contracted it from his wife. At once both profoundly grave, for the severity of the subject matter that finds itself the ground upon which the video is made—AIDS—and simultaneously comical, for the affects produced by Chevalier and his co-conspirators, the video almost surreptitiously rehearses the by now well-known Žižekian dictum on how to imagine and conceive of political life in the public sphere amidst a time of seemingly otherwise impenetrable crisis—first as tragedy, then as farce. Six years later, at the age of 19, Chevalier—whose artistic oeuvre, if one were to conduct a rigorous survey of it,

presently denotes and connotes radically potent approaches to thinking life, death, and politics under the sign of AIDS—tests positive, and it will still be, then, several years later, in 2010, when he reformats and stages what at its core still bears the semblance of childhood theatricality, fashions it into what I read as a campy biography of and for a future inscribed in and by a now-distant past.



Against the turn toward at times vulgar nostalgia that has reached fever pitch in recent times regarding the revival of (read: remembrance) the history of queer life for younger, perhaps more impressionable, and more contemporary members of the queer community, that attempts to revive memory itself, a memory one cannot easily claim for oneself, in and through the gesture of romanticizing and even fetishizing the bygone days of the gay liberation movement, also mired and deeply affected by the deaths of so many men, one might read in this repurposing of the video not nostalgia but a campy, utterly non-bourgeois and thus

non-libratory, gesture at a memory that anticipates the future by claiming the future as antecedent to life in the past itself. In this sense, it both names and lays claim to the future from the past it attempts to unfold, address, and revive as a foretelling of the future to come. Also, it might bequeath us to simultaneously, as well, read in this project a profound critique—a critique already implicit in camp’s capacity to laugh at its own self, to not take itself too seriously precisely and intentionally because of the seriousness that is always already implicit in life, as such—of any discourse that claims to situate and couple fantasies of presumed childhood innocence with the impulse toward nostalgia. Chevalier and his friends are anything but innocent bystanders to historical time or temporality; rather, in the strictest Heideggerian sense of being “thrown,” the video showcases what it means to be thrown into the midst of a historical time and into a world traumatized—cracked open, ruptured to produce a caesura in any presumed and assumed linear order of time—by the history of AIDS, that which both sits amidst and alongside it.

Moving away from and beyond attributing trauma with either a positive or negative value—though knowing fully well that moral life often falls prey to this presumably inevitable folly of deeming and speculating judgment and taste to affective life—is this precisely not what it, the traumatizing of history or, more succinctly put, traumatized temporality, is? As such, as Comay suggests, trauma is wherein “the linear order of time is thrown out of

sequence" (25). Trauma, here a deeply psychoanalytic term, is not, and never has been, an easily describable thing, if a "thing" at all, because "to be traumatized" as such is not subjectivity as being described by external characteristics or determinants (*i.e.* the person "looks" traumatized or that situation "appears" traumatic)—it is not in a look or a perceivable visible affect, though there are ways in which it can manifest or appear as such in a "look" *per se*. It evades and eludes being touched. Rather, it is more akin to a shift in our self-perception that coincides, falls alongside, a shift in how we experience time, the temporality of the traumatic event—history, as such—that cannot be easily named. So quite unlike Ryan Murphy—who restaged Larry Kramer's 1985 *The Normal Heart*, narrativizing the early days of the AIDS crisis, in the form of a made-for-television film in 2014—who claimed, regarding this restaging, "the actors were so emotional. The tears were flowing from the very first take, because the pain of the material and the ghosts of all the people who had died were so intense. People were very reverential. Everybody cried every day of that movie" (Ausiello), it would appear that Chevalier's project's intentionality is radically and altogether different. Unlike Murphy, whose attempt, it would seem, was to depict the traumatic Real of the AIDS crisis—the pain, the intensity, the reverential attachment to and investment in historical details, the ghosts and their hauntings—Chevalier's desire appears to be one wanting to merely approach the traumatic history, an autobiography at that, via a

campy gesture that only barely grazes the surface of that Real. Unlike Murphy's penchant for an all too effusive and seeming realism that still does not even come close to the Real of trauma despite appearances, Chevalier approaches the experience of that traumatic history *vis-à-vis* a return to a childhood that assumes—and never forgets—that this history has always already been a part of him, inextricably tied to his and, by extension, our identities. He achieves this through a child's play, not so much to return to a time of innocence but to undergird that presumed innocence with a different sense, a sense that is aware of the impossibility of touching the traumatic. Laughter is not just the best medicine in this scenario—it might not even be a medicine, as such—it, more significantly perhaps, becomes the diagnostic tool for recognizing the rupture in historical time; here, a rupture signified by AIDS itself.

And what of anticipation in this scene that happens upon the traumatic via the campy? Or, rather, what is anticipated in the video that becomes the future past, in the future to come? And, how might we imagine memory and self-perception within the gestural openings made possible by such a project that privileges the campy—again what is "traumatic" regresses into the scene of appearance—against the easy fall into the realm of nostalgia? Fundamentally, the question, as well, might be one of redemption—what might be redeemed or recuperated from trauma, when time, historical time, shifts, is forced out of step with itself, when it becomes the future past it had already come to

anticipate, wherein the rupture in time is constitutive of how we remember the future simultaneously as we remember the past as well and when this recuperation, this redemption, is mediated via the playing out of a campy gesture addressing what is profoundly a grave history. All this abstraction might cut into the very way in which we think being, queer being, life and death, living and dying, in the scene of AIDS, and consider memory—and not just nostalgia driven by market forces or bourgeois investments in a linear historicity—as constitutive of how we think of that being, here a being thrown into the fray of a ruptured temporality, ruptured precisely because AIDS, as William Haver once suggested, “is, for consciousness and for thought, a necessarily impossible object” (1). This impossibility is an impossibility to take seriously precisely because as Haver continues, “AIDS is radically unthinkable, resisting objectification, interpretation, the understanding, meaning, and the aspiration to transcendental subjectivity absolutely” (1). Even the present-day fall into nostalgia, as suggested by gestures such as the one made by Murphy, presumes an easy explication on how to relate to AIDS, to name it and to claim it as one’s own, as part of one’s own personal or historical trajectory. What Chevalier’s video project does, contra to this fall into nostalgia, is that it stages a relationship to AIDS that is profoundly ephemeral and intentionally so for its own keen self-awareness of how AIDS, as much as it is riveted to the claims of lived experience within discourses regarding health, illness, wellness, treatment, and cure, is

also a relationship to time, a relationship to how time, time itself, given over to its own unsettling, and trauma might be intrinsically tied to one another in what we remember of the disparate nature of living under and within the sign of AIDS. The “impossibility” to think the object of AIDS is precisely staged in the way by which much of the repurposing of the video, years later after Chevalier himself tests positive, relies on the very abstract nature of a future as yet to be realized, but simultaneously living, time already coming to ruin within the past that is played out within the scene itself. AIDS as an “impossible object,” as an abstraction that cuts into being, exists most profoundly within such a staging of a temporal disjuncture; it exists simultaneously as both lived experience and beyond it as an unnamable force, a sign always to live within and under and already present in the past that anticipates the future. It exists precisely in the tear in time, and in how this time might be remembered heretofore, simultaneously as we laugh at a couple of children play-acting questions regarding mortality in a home video.

What remains? Memory—in how it might be remembered both as a past and as a future yet to still be named and claimed. A detour, of sorts, might be worthwhile to explore. In the now classic tale of memory and remembrance of traumatic ruptures that both inform and is informed by historical time, penned by Marguerite Duras and filmed by Alain Resnais, the 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour*, the character of the French woman, only known within the confines of her common name “French

woman” proposes an uncanny, again in the Freudian sense, experience with memory and remembrance that “forgetting will begin with our eyes” (*Hiroshima mon amour*). Using this notion that radically stages and privileges, perhaps necessarily so, a scopical fidelity to how we choose to remember, forget, and live with the past—perhaps, in the scene of campy theatricality, in the scene of a laughter that cannot be helped, but that cannot as well be taken seriously—it becomes imperative to think through the temporality of the gesture of looking at historical memory, in how queer subjectivities always already live in the time of a future anteriority, and how AIDS as sign and signifier, as both lived experience and as campy abstraction, both one and the same in the same instance,

both the subject and object of the look at history and what ruptures it, has written for us a biography of and for the future, a memory of the future to come. The uncanny tendency, here, of restaging that “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 124) speaks as much about perceived and perceivable lived experience as it does about time, a turn, or rather, a return, to(ward) a time, not so much in the vein of a nostalgia that arouses merely the sensual in and of taste, judgment, and discourse, but in the name of a time in which living, dying, and laughing are historicized and simultaneously anticipated.

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