MILITARY *CAMPING*:
PIER VITTORIO TONDELLI'S HOMOSEXUALIZED BARRACKS
IN *PAO PAO*

SCILTIAN GASTALDI

Summary: Pier Vittorio Tondelli's second novel, *Pao Pao* (1982), has often been considered as an example of hedonism and lack of structural criticism against the military institution. This study contradicts the vulgate by demonstrating its full readability through the lenses of queer theory via an explicit adoption of a camp point of view. Tondelli used camp as an aesthetics that also includes political intentionality, clearly visible in the novel's proud—and yet amused—stance against the homophobic and heteronormative core of the army. *Pao Pao*'s camp, and its framing of military uniforms and plain clothes under the umbrella of just another (deeply queer) drag experiment, aim to the production of a new rainbow-queer-social-visibility-tesserae within and against the larger mosaic of a highly heteronormative society: the Italy of the Eighties.

PAO, in the Italian military jargon, stands for 'Picchetto Armato Ordinario,' i.e. Ordinary Armed Guard. Translating from the *Manuale dell'Alpino*, a PAO "consists of a commander and a number of non-commissioned officers and Alpines commensurate with the expected needs of use. Its task is to integrate the security service in the barracks at non-service hours and prompt intervention in situations of particular gravity and urgency" (17). During the lengthy time of the compulsory military service—which in Italy lasted for 144 years, between 1861 and 2005—"to be up for a PAO" represented for many drafters one of the duller obligations of their already not-so-exciting army service and, at the same time, it self-identified as one of the many niche-terms for seasoned soldiers that had no meaning outside the military world.

When, in 1982, Pier Vittorio Tondelli chose this bizarre, repeated acronym *Pao Pao* as the title for his second fiction book, he was looking for a sharp speaking name that could both relate to the topic of his new work—a year spent under the army by a community of young gay guys—and ring a bell about the ironic, playful tone that imbued his army novel.¹

¹ In addition, the sound "Pao Pao" has the same short, repetitive structure of the term "Dada," the art movement of the European avant-garde born out of nega-

This contribution reappraises Tondelli's frequently demolished² publication *Pao Pao* as one of the most relevant examples of Italian camp literature. Considering the wide array of definitions that the concept of camp has gathered during the last two centuries, this study begins by outlining what is intended for camp and for camp literature. The guiding concept of this brief review is to propose the idea of camp as an aesthetics that also includes political intentionality; thus the interpretations of camp as a political phenomenon are more coherent within the frame of queer studies because they corroborate the thrust towards a queer social and cultural visibility. The scope and boundaries of the present study are: (i) to identify and reflect upon the most relevant definitions of camp that literary critics (and they alone) have coined; (ii) to highlight the reasons why it is congruous for contemporary queer culture to consider camp as a style *that is also* a political manifesto. A political manifesto that in some of its cultural productions, and certainly in Tondelli's *Pao Pao*, intends to subvert authority and hierarchy by unmasking its artificial status as a performative construct.

tive reaction to the horrors of First World War, and has sounds that are widely present in the initial vocabulary of Italian babies learning their first words.

- ² Tondelli's first two novels, *Altri libertini* (1980) and *Pao Pao* (1982), gathered a significant amount of negative criticism in Italy from both the Catholic and the Marxist literary establishment (Bettin 16-7; Kaufmann 6; Medici 12; Barbati 24; Guglielmi "Questi giovani d'oggi" 14; and *Trent'anni* 84-5; Turchetta 18; Clerici 20; and others). These critics interpreted *Pao Pao* more as an instant-memoir or a quick diary, rather than a novel. In addition, the Marxist critics pointed out the lack of a structural denunciation of military life's harshness. *Altri libertini* managed to receive numerous positive critiques particularly after winning a lawsuit against obscenity and religious contempt, which helped the book in becoming a symbol of modernity, a generational cult and a best seller. *Pao Pao*, instead, has remained until today largely unacknowledged by critics. On the contrary, *Pao Pao* obtained fame and popularity amongst the readers, particularly amid Italian youth when the year of military service was still obligatory. This constituted an instant niche market that helped the novel reach other European audiences. In fact, *Pao Pao*, was translated in France (Seuil, 1985), in Spain (Editorial Portic, 1988), and in Germany (Rowohlt, 1989). Furthermore, the widely unfavourable reviews of Tondelli's early works should be framed within the larger panorama of Eighties' critique. As Capozzi reports (157), these were the years of the well-known polemic ensued from an interview given by Edoardo Sanguineti to *L'Espresso*, which then resonates in several other journals. In that interview, the famous intellectual stigmatized the presence of an "inutile eleganza" (useless elegance) in the works of the so-called "giovani narratori" (young narrators).

The second and last part of this contribution applies the definition of a political camp to Tondelli's novel *Pao Pao* in order to: (i) expose English readers to the content of *Pao Pao* and to acquaint them with Tondelli's sly charm and humour, considering that this novel is yet to be published in English due to its linguistically and sub-culturally-related³ problems in translation; (ii) demonstrate why *Pao Pao*, contrary to what has been written by previous critics, is imbued with a political meaning; (iii) impugn the negative criticism *Pao Pao* gained and to affirm it as a work of literature truly ahead of its time *because of* its campy component and anti-army satire. Through a close reading of *Pao Pao*, this essay shall emphasize some of the passages where Tondelli ostentatiously uses camp as his political tool to dismantle from within the authority of the quintessentially oppressive and most homophobic institution—the army. In 1982 Italy, the military national service (a.k.a “la leva” or “la naja”) was a 12-month exclusively and aggressively male rite of passage imposed by law on virtually all healthy men between the ages of 18 and 28. Very few were exempted from this compulsory service; from 1962 to 1985, one of the potential causes of exemption was reserved to those who self-identified as “sexually inverted,” a stigma that not many wanted to deal with and that convinced legions of homosexuals to serve in the army, regardless of their feelings. As a consequence, military culture was dominated by a kind of masculinity that highlighted physical strength and bravery as well as heterosexual adventures, heavy drinking and random violence, especially against the recruits or whomever seemed to be unfit to serve (“nonnismo”). In such an environment, homosexuals in the army could exist as long as they were able to hide and deny their own sexual orientation: the barracks was the ideal place where heteronormativity ruled. Up to 1982, this is the reason why, virtually all the Italian novels that somehow associated homosexuality to military service were dominated by a doom and gloom atmosphere. On the contrary, the fort depicted in *Pao Pao* does not come out at all as an austere and heteronormative place. For the first time in Italian literature, in Tondelli's garrison the young men are not introduced to the asperities of military life in order to become (heterosexual) soldiers and patriots, through a painful process of self-neglect. Quite the opposite, the *Pao Pao* military camp is a male-only place where young men can *above all* meet hundreds of other young men, and *come out to each other* as gleefully gay

³ Sub-culture in terms of the mixture and overlay of Italian military jargon and code, Italian gay jargon and code, Italian youthful register of the 1980s, and Tondelli's many neologisms and regionalisms. The coexistence of all these sub-cultural layers is a huge challenge to any translator.

as *they feel* to be. It is a campy military camp, pun intended. In this way, Tondelli's intellectual approach results in a queer political commitment because he seizes a traditionally homophobic locus. In simpler terms, the author *homosexualizes* a heteronormative core. Using Moe Meyer's terminology in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, Pao Pao's camp "aims to the production of a queer social visibility within and against a highly heteronormative society" (11). Even the concept of *patria*, i.e. fatherland, in the hands of these ostentatiously gay young men in uniform is reinterpreted under a very different (and innovative, for the times) rainbow light.

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The first print citation of the sense of camp as gay or exaggeratedly effeminate dates from 1909, when J. Redding Ware's *Passing English of the Victorian Era* reported that, in the slang of the times, camp referred to "actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis. [...] Used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character. 'How very camp he is.'" (61)

Besides J. Redding Ware's vocabulary entry,⁴ camp's literary genesis is heavily debated. Contrary to what is maintained even in prestigious scholarly works, the first appearance of the term "camp" in fiction is in the 1925 short story "The Lodging House," included in the collection *Distinguished Air*,⁵ by the gay writer Robert McAlmon.⁶ Amongst the various passages in

⁴ On the ambiguous etymology of the term "camp" much has been written and much needs to be written still, but the topic is beyond the boundaries of this contribution. See: Reyce, Sylvie. "The Swinging Set." *Detroit News*. 13 Feb. 1966: 5-E; "Taste: 'Camp.'" *Time*, 1 Dec. 1964: 75 (states that camp "originally derived from an Australian term for 'a low saloon'."); John Simon, "Two Camps." *Partisan Review* 32.1 (Winter, 1965): 154-57; Susan Sontag [rejoinder to the foregoing], *ibid.*, 157-58; Thomas Meehan, "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste-It's Camp." *New York Times Magazine* 21 Mar. 1965: 30-31; 113-15; George Frazier, "Call It Camp." *Holiday* Nov. 1965: 12; 16-23 (defines it as 'a matter of style'; states that *Variety* used the term in the mid-1920s). The etymology of camp lends itself to debate and periodically stimulates contributions in the press, also very recent ones: Clements, Warren. "How camp became campy." *The Globe and Mail* 27 Jul. 2012: <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/how-camp-became-campy/article4445030/>>. May 31st, 2013.

⁵ Today in McAlmon, Robert. *Miss Knight and the Others*. Foreword by Gore Vidal; intro by Edward N.S. Lorusso. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, c1992.

⁶ On Robert McAlmon's performative queerness, drawing on Judith Butler's the-

which the term appears, are the following: “Seating herself, she leaned back her head with a gesture meant to express hauteur, narrowed her eyes into a squint, and began at once to camp” (8); “[w]e had not spoken fifteen sentences to each other before Foster was camping, hands on hips, with a quick eye to notice every man who passed by” (23). In these passages the term is used as a verb, in the acception established by J. Redding Ware. McAlmon was an American expatriate who established himself in the Berlin of the 1920s, and whose writings inspired⁷ the later texts of a major American gay writer: Christopher Isherwood. In fact, a subsequent extended (and much more quoted) definition appears in *The World in the Evening*⁸ (1954), a novel by Isherwood.

The first theoretical reflection on camp tracks back to 1964, to the famous *Notes on Camp* by Susan Sontag, today considered by many inaccurate⁹ and outdated. Sontag’s *Notes* defined camp just as “a sensibility,”

ory that subjects are compelled to reiterate gender norms, see: Zeikowitz, Richard E. “Constrained in Liberation: Performative Queerness in Robert McAlmon’s Berlin Stories.” 27-42. The essay explores how McAlmon’s characters are constrained to repeat queer regulatory norms.

⁷ Inspiration regarding the semiautobiographical Berliner frame of the stories, at least, given that McAlmon’s characters seemingly embrace the denigrated characteristics of queerness because the Berlin of McAlmon’s text offers no alternative paradigm.

⁸ In this fiction text, the meaning of camp is discussed explicitly during a dialogue between the characters of Charles and Stephen Monk: “In any of your *voyages au bout de la nuit*, did you ever run across the word ‘camp’?” A question that starts a lively dialogue between the two characters, in which Isherwood distinguishes between common place camp, which he actually calls “Low Camp,” and his personal interpretation of camp, which he labels as “High Camp”. At the end of the dialogue, Stephen fears that the definition of camp obtained may be too elastic, but Isherwood has Charles say: “Actually, it isn’t at all. But I admit it’s terribly hard to define. You have to meditate on it and feel it intuitively, like Lao-tze’s *Tao*. Once you’ve done that, you’ll find yourself wanting to use the word whenever you discuss aesthetics or philosophy or almost anything. I never can understand how critics manage to do without it” (126). Although the ironic intentionality—against the critics, too—of the writer is adamant, it is also true that the term “camp” is one of those literary criticism keywords that is open to the evolution of its meaning over time.

⁹ Mark Booth has listed a surprisingly high number of lacunae and mistakes in Sontag’s famous article. See: Booth, Mark. “Campe-toi! Definitions & Origins.” 11-41, esp. 11-14 and 30. Highly critical of Sontag’s contribution, for different reasons than Booth’s, are also David Bergman and Marcie Frank. See: Bergman

providing a long and detailed list of 58 peculiar characteristics.. Amongst Sontag's remarks some are insightful and convincing because they posit a set of criteria; others, such as those defining camp as a sensibility, or endorsing an apolitical camp, are questionable and have already been criticized by many scholars;¹⁰ therefore they will not be discussed in this study. Sontag's notes number 3, 7, 10, 41 and 56 are valid, and read:

3. [...] True, the Camp eye has the power to transform experience. But [...] It's not *all* in the eye of the beholder.
7. [...] Nothing in nature can be campy. [...]
10. Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being as Playing a Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre.
41. The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to "the serious." One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.
56. Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. [...] People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing that label as 'a camp,' they're enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling. [...]. (517-30)

Note number 10 seems to pin down the concept of camp better than any other. The essence of camp, here claimed, is precisely in its quotation marks, i.e. in its conscious self-irony and intentional sarcastic wink included in those quotation marks. Often times the camp phenomena are labeled

⁹ Mark Booth has listed a surprisingly high number of lacunae and mistakes in Sontag's famous article. See: Booth, Mark. "Campe-toi! Definitions & Origins." 11-41, esp. 11-14 and 30. Highly critical of Sontag's contribution, for different reasons than Booth's, are also David Bergman and Marcie Frank. See: Bergman "Introduction" 3-16. Frank Marcie. "The Critic as Performance Artist: Susan Sontag's Writing and Gay Cultures" 173-84. More recently, Paul Varnell has written a very poignant critique of Sontag's article, debunking many of her camp examples. See: Varnell, Paul. "Sour 'Notes on Camp'" (2000). Another inspiring critic who has opposed Sontag's interpretation of camp is Christine Riddiough. She has explained that the camp awareness of playing a role comes from the daily experience of many homosexuals of the time, for whom "living and staying alive require an ability to be what one is not, to play a role" (1980, 21) before society. See: Riddiough, Christine. "Culture and Politics" 14-33.

¹⁰ Including: John Simon, 1965; Christine Riddiough, 1980; Mark Booth, 1983; Philip Core, 1984; David Bergman, 1993; Moe Meyer, 1994; Chuck Kleinhans, 1994; Thomas A. King, 1994; Paul Varnell, 2000. The polemic against Sontag's *Notes* is today so notorious that this paper, which endorses many of Booth's criticism, will not indulge on it.

or associated with kitsch¹¹ because of their common fascination with anti-aesthetics and the bad object of mass consumption. However, the two phenomena can hardly be considered identical for at least three reasons: (i) as Tinkcom (14-22) maintains, camp stages the kitsch object to understand its conditions for becoming recognized in the domain of bourgeois good taste; (ii) it is the absence of the self-ironic characteristic of kitsch that distinguishes it from camp; (iii) re-interpreting Buffoni's words, camp goes beyond kitsch in its political intentionality: "[il camp è] uno stile che celebra l'eccentricità e sublima il Kitsch, trasformandolo in una forma di eccellenza estetica per snob suprema, per meta-snob, per chi è in grado di apprezzare perversamente ciò che l'élite culturale disprezza"¹² (53). This does not exclude, as Sontag maintains in notes 18 to 23, that one may find camp also in unintentional examples, i.e. in products that aim to be chic, but actually reveal themselves to the opinion of many to be an aesthetic failure. However, instead of considering unintentional camp as "Pure Camp," as Sontag claims, I contend that pure camp is only the intentional camp effort, usually in guise of a provocation. In fact, whatever is unintentional is not sought after and lacks any purpose: either being "pure," rough or political. Furthermore, nothing in prose or poetry is there by chance: every single element is introduced by the author, or eventually interpreted by the reader, for a reason. Amongst these necessary and meaningful elements, the style used—be it camp or not—is certainly intentional.

Sontag links "Camping", "Camp" and "homosexuality" in an interrelation that is interesting when applied to the concept of camp in Tondelli's works and to the idea of camp as a political phenomenon. The notes related to this issue are number 51 and 52, partially¹³ below:

¹¹ Kitsch and camp are often associated, normally in a derogatory term, as examples of "bad taste". For analyses on kitsch, see: Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" 34-49. Fiedler, Leslie A. "The Death of *Avant-Garde* Literature." 1964, 454-60. Eco, Umberto "La struttura del cattivo gusto," 65-129. Eco, Umberto. "Kitsch, kitsch, kitsch: urrah!" 199-224. Buffoni, Franco. "Kitsch/Camp." 52-4. Also very interesting is Matthew Tinkcom's paragraph "Kitch versus Camp, or the Discovery of the Queer Agent of Bad Taste" within the introduction to his volume *Working as a Homosexual. Camp, Capital, Cinema*. (14-22).

¹² "[Camp is] a style that cherishes eccentricity and sublimates kitsch, transforming it in a form of aesthetic excellence for supreme snobs, for meta-snobs, for those who are capable of perversely appreciating what is despised by the cultural elite." (Translation is my own).

¹³ The quotation casts aside Sontag's very interesting but here too committal

51. The peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained. While it's not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap. [...] So, not all homosexuals have Camp taste. But homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard [...] of Camp. [...].
52. [...] Homosexuals have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense. Camp is a solvent of morality. [...] (529)

If homosexuals constitute the vanguard of camp, it means that camp is a mainly gay outcome. Thus, camp becomes an element that can work as a “gaydar,” i.e. a gay radar, or an objective indicator that where this style is used, a presence of homosexual taste is either implicit or explicit. As such, camp aesthetic can be used in literature to flag a general queer presence: in its author, in those readers who perceive it, or in both. Whatever is the case, a mere queer presence, in the literature of the last two centuries, has been a clear political claim (recorded under the label of “queer social and cultural visibility”) fighting against the Victorian philosophy of the “unspeakable vice.”

Sontag's 53rd reflection¹⁴ partially contradicts the 51st note, triggering many critics to oppose her statement, and to further analyze the rapport between camp and homosexuality. One of the earliest and most convincing contributors is Esther Newton, who defines camp as “a system of humor” and, as such, certainly not as something unintentional. This is also Tondelli's interpretation of camp, as explained in a review of Pescatori's book—*L'odalisco*—published in 1989 on the prominent magazine *L'Espresso*. Camp humor, according to Newton, is “a system of laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms” (109). Thus, Newton's central idea is one of conscious incongruity and the way one reacts when finds one's self in an incongruous situation. In fact, Newton adds: “camp is concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformations and incongruity” (105). The transformations faced by the camp performer, replace a system of “*incongruous juxtapositions*” (106) that results in being sarcastic and self-

claim on the existence of an analogy between Jews and homosexuals as “the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture” (529).

¹⁴ “Nevertheless, even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste. Obviously, its metaphor of life as theater is peculiarly suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals. (The Camp insistence on not being “serious,” on playing, also connects with the homosexual's desire to remain youthful.) Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would” (529).

ironic. In this sense we can maintain that camp is the satire of queer culture. Newton adds: "It is possible to discern strong themes in any particular campy thing or event. The three that seemed most recurrent and characteristic to me were incongruity, theatricality, and humor. All three are intimately related to the homosexual situation and strategy. Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humour its strategy" (106). Newton explains this triad, maintaining that camp depends on the audience's perception, or on the creation of an incongruous mechanism of juxtapositions that can go well beyond the Biblical dichotomy masculine-feminine. For this reason, "any very incongruous contrast can be campy" (107). For Newton, the homosexual performer or author, "creates" camp by pointing his finger at something incongruous, or trying to directly¹⁵ represent it. Camp deals with a lack of self-esteem, showing, contrary to what Newton claims,¹⁶ its side of social-political commitment. In Newton words: "Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it laughable" (111). It is important to note that the embracing-the-stigma-philosophy not only is at the base of the most modern anti-AIDS campaigns, but also it follows the linguistic theory applied by the LGBTQ movement in reclaiming from within those originally derogatory and homophobic terms as the English "queer," or "camp" indeed, the Italian "*frocio*," the German "*schwule*," and many others. Per se, this theory of inclusion of camp would be sufficient to evaluate Newton's interpretation as one of the most political and coherent with the entire queer studies field, notwithstanding his very weak definition of camp as a pre- or proto-political phenomenon.

Theatricality, Newton's second element of camp, is described through

¹⁵ The main aesthetic example proposed by Newton is thus the one of female impersonators, or in the now more common gay jargon, drag-queens', i.e. men who embody women on a stage. Newton writes that drag queens care about the male-to-female transformation, while Camp cares about what could be called a philosophy of transformation and of incongruity.

¹⁶ In rather contradictory fashion, however, Newton claims that camp "is a pre- or proto-political phenomenon" (111). Sontag, too, was convinced that camp is "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" ("Notes" 517) but this goes strikingly against the very convincing point made by Christine Riddiough (21), who has explained that the camp awareness of playing a role comes from the daily experience of many homosexuals of the time. Moreover, Moe Meyer has illustrated that camp is political, because its process aims to the production of a queer social visibility within and against a highly heteronormative society (11). Thus, camp must be intended as political.

three interconnected aspects: firstly, camp is a style where “importance tends to shift from what a thing *is* to how it *looks*, from *what* is done to *how* it is done” (107); secondly, camp always includes a “dramatic form” rendered by an entertainer-performer and an audience, therefore a stage and an audience; lastly, camp is suffused with the perception of ‘being as playing a role’ and ‘life as theatre’” (107).

The third and final peculiarity of camp is its humour. Again in Newton’s words: “Camp is for fun; the aim of camp is to make an audience laugh. In fact, it is a system of humor. Camp humor is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying” (109). Incongruity, theatricality, and humour: as will be shown in the second part of this study—the three elements emphasized by Newton are vivid in Tondelli’s *Pao Pao*.

To categorize Tondelli’s strategy in *Pao Pao*, this study refers to Mark Booth’s definition of camp: “Camp is primarily a matter of self-presentation rather than of sensibility. [...] *To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits*” (17-8). Booth’s intuition is valuable for many reasons: firstly, because it gets rid of the idea of camp as a mere “sensibility;” secondly because it goes back to the concept of “marginality,” while establishing some boundaries to this marginality. Camp quite often deals with marginal aspects, as in *Pao Pao*. Life in the margins was one of the most important themes in Tondelli’s debut novel, *Altri libertini*. In *Pao Pao*, Tondelli delves on the explanation of how it is possible for a bunch of happy gay youngsters to survive within the homophobic Leviathan. This goes against the Marxist theory of providing a straightforward criticism of the military institution as a bourgeois superstructure set to uniform and homogenize youth by State dictation; nevertheless *Pao Pao* unquestionably comes out as a military satire that expresses a sharp criticism against the military institution as it was in Italy in the Eighties. The survival of Tondelli’s characters happens not only *without* them having to pass through their self-neglect, but also through the exploitation of those niche environments typical of any barracks. Niche environments that *Pao Pao*’s characters colour in shocking pink, as will be analyzed below. The gradual homosexualization of *Pao Pao*’s barracks is the very peculiar marginality that fascinates Tondelli. At the end of the novel it is clear that *that* kind of military system—of redundant hierarchies, of contorted bureaucratic organization—can form neither patriots nor efficient soldiers, but at least it offers many occasions to fraternize amongst young privates, for those who come out and dare to dare.

The sole interesting aspect of Philip’s Core agile and creative encyclopedia of camp is the initial page of twenty-five “Camp Rules” (7) that

define camp or define fields in which camp is present. Here, only three are notable. First and foremost, “Camp is a lie which tells the truth”¹⁷ strongly recalls the famous definition of art given by Pablo Picasso¹⁸ and makes the reader think of camp as an authorial strategy capable of unmasking something that others would prefer to remain hidden, a concept that brings us back to the idea of camp as a “gay radar.” The rule “Camp is a disguise that fails,” shifts the attention to the necessity of camouflage embedded within camp, but also—and this is crucial—to its clear will of *being recognizable as a disguise*. In *Pao Pao*, Tondelli introduces at least one seminal character who *intends to be* a disguise that fails: la Bella Perotto (The She-Beautiful Perotto). This is the character who cares the least about appearing for what he is not, and accepts to wear the military uniform just as another campy drag experiment, perhaps a more extravagant one. Framing military uniforms and plain clothes under the umbrella of transvestitism, as Tondelli does in *Pao Pao*, brings us to the third and last relevant definition given by Core: “Camp is essential to military discipline.”

Besides Stefano Casi’s and Gabriele Carleschi’s brilliant articles of 1989, the most important Italian critic on camp is Fabio Cleto, who finally interrupted the lack of structured theoretical contributions from Italian voices on this topic. In *Camp. Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, Cleto provides a definition of camp by drawing on Esther Newton’s term “an aesthetic strategy.” Within his ample introduction (1-48), Cleto recalls how the term developed in the works of other intellectuals. In the more concise introduction to the first volume of the Italian anthology *PopCamp* (1: 9-16), Cleto sketches the definitions of camp given by the critics of the last seventy years:

Si tratta di un’estetica, uno stile o un gusto, è stato detto, oppure di una sensibilità, un modo d’essere. Uno stile di pensiero e di performance. Una specifica formazione — fors’anche una prerogativa — omosessuale, una strategia di sopravvivenza (ma con stile, nella maschera dell’ironia), eppure difficilmente circoscrivibile all’omosessualità, di per sé condizione non necessaria né sufficiente. Di volta in volta, la si assume come categoria metastorica, oppure inesorabilmente legata al particolare.¹⁹ (1: 10)

¹⁷ Also used as the subtitle of Core’s work.

¹⁸ Picasso, in a dialogue with Marius de Zayas, claimed that “El arte es una mentira que nos acerca a la verdad.” See: “Picasso Speaks,” 315-26.

¹⁹ “[Camp] is an aesthetics, a style or a taste, it has been stated, or a sensibility, a way of being. [Camp is] A way of thinking and of performing. [Camp is] A specific formation—perhaps also a prerogative—of the homosexuals, a survival strategy (but with lots of style, in guise of irony), and yet hardly containable to

The definition proposed by Cleto is convincing, as much as the section in which the author claims that the gay sub-cultures of Europe and Latin America present different aspects of an underground camp world able to emerge within the mainstream (*Camp* 11). Cleto, who includes in his anthology Arbasino's "Il trionfo della volpe,"²⁰ helps in demonstrating Tondelli's fondness of camp. Arbasino, as is widely known, was one of Tondelli's models; his influence is also demonstrated in the credits of the first edition of *Altri libertini*.²¹ Nevertheless, missing from Cleto's first camp canon are icons of Italian culture (especially theatre, opera, melodrama, and pop music) that seem to be undisputable representatives of the *Belpaese* camp movement.²² Opera and Pop Music have produced a wide array of Italian camp artists, both amongst homosexual and heterosexual singers. Indeed, a few of these names are present in Cleto's anthology *PopCamp* that, up to the time this article was written, stands out as the

homosexuality alone, since homosexuality is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for camp. From time to time, [camp] it is assumed as a meta-historical category, or inexorably linked to the particular." (Translation is my own).

²⁰ An excerpt from *La narcisata*.

²¹ The paper refers to the credits to the first edition of *Altri libertini*, where Tondelli thanks Arbasino for his "politiche da cinebrivido" (cinema-thrill techniques), in the "titoli di coda" (closing credits) later expunged from the 1987 edition. Tondelli himself has been considered as a "nipotino di Arbasino" (Arbasino's petit grandson) and Arbasino himself acknowledged Tondelli's talent ("C'è una penna in caserma;" "Festeggiar leggendo". See also Arbasino: "[Tondelli era] il più promettente dei miei 'nipotini'." – "[Tondelli was] the most promising of my 'petit grandsons'." ("Rileggendo una sua dedica":11).

²² To name a few: theatre actor Paolo Poli, a true monument of Italian contemporary culture, defined as the Italian example of "high Camp" by Razzini; theatre actress Franca Valeri, who applied a clear camp aesthetics to her characters of the "signorina snob" (snobbish miss) and later of "Signora Cecioni" (Mrs. Cecioni); theatre actress Paola Borboni, the first Italian artist to stage a naked breast (*Algamarina*, by Carlo Veneziani, 1925); vaudeville soubrette Wanda Osiris, whose theatrical shows were so popular from the Thirties to the Fifties, that many consider her as the inventor of a show genre of her own. Fast-forwarding to later decades, the Italian camp canon should today include: actress and circus boss Moira Orfei, for her never-changing gaudy look and her extravagant make up; writer Barbara Alberti for her texts and TV appearances; singer and TV show-woman Raffaella Carrà, for her look and lyrics; TV star, comedian and writer Luciana Littizzetto, for her look and texts; and theatre drag actor and writer Alessandro Fullin; radio TV drag soubrette Platinette.

only critical monograph published²³ in Italian on camp.

One of the most interesting polemics about camp is the one between Moe Meyer and Susan Sontag. In the volume *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994), Meyer gathered and edited a series of contributions that are openly against Sontag's 1964 definitions. In her introduction to the book, Meyer maintains: "Camp is political; Camp is solely queer (and/or sometimes gay and lesbian) discourse; and Camp embodies a specifically queer cultural critique. [...] Because un-queer appropriations interpret Camp within the context of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality, they no longer qualify as Camp as it is defined here" (1). Faced with such a radical position, which includes the idea of expelling from a cultural category those products that do not emerge from authors of a certain sexual orientation,²⁴ it is possible to focus on elements on which camp *is* political, because, as Meyer claims, its presence is intentional and its process aims at the production of a queer social visibility within and against a highly heteronormative society.²⁵ In addition, Camp is political when its manifestations intend to subvert rigid masculine authority and hierarchy, by pointing out its artificial status as a performative construct. Furthermore, as Core has noticed, "Besides being a signal, camp was and remains the way in which homosexuals and other groups of people with double lives can find a *lingua franca*" (9). Functioning as such, camp is inherently political since it reveals a niche of identity-producing representations that work against the heteronormative social background. However, Meyer's interpretation of camp as "solely queer" has been labeled by Cleto as having a "fundamental(ist) key" (*Camp* 19). It is possible to agree with Cleto, especially considering the clear examples of heterosexual artists who have con-

²³ Although it is just a self-publication, it seems fair to quote here also a minor Italian monographic contribution on Camp. See: Meis, Gianluca. *Del Camp*. Meis' work offers an academically valid first part, but loses its way in the subsequent sections.

²⁴ Moe Meyer also includes in her definition of "queer" those heterosexuals that maintain a homosexual practice without claiming a specific identity, but this opens a Pandora's box that brings us off topic. See: Meyer, Moe. "Introduction. Reclaiming the discourse of Camp" (3-4).

²⁵ The same concept has been maintained by Gregg Blachford: "[...] there is some evidence that the gay sub-culture negotiates an oppositional challenge to some aspects of the dominant order. The best way to understand this innovative style is to examine one phenomenon of the gay sub-culture – camp – and to show how it transforms conformity into challenge" (Cit. in Meyer 11)

tributed to the queer social visibility, as much as to the camp aesthetics.²⁶ To the wide array of heterosexual campy authors one can add Philip Core's "Camp rule": "Camp is not necessarily homosexual. Anyone or anything can be camp. But it takes one to know one", that is to say: every artist can produce a campy work, but it is only when a homosexual spectator/critic labels a work as camp, that work *becomes* camp. Core elaborates the concept in his introduction:

I do not posit homosexuality as requisite for camp: quite the contrary. Camp is most obvious to me in a homosexual context, but I perceive it in heterosexuals as well, and in the sexless professionalism of many careers. There are only two things essential to camp: a secret within the personality which one ironically wishes to conceal and to exploit, and a peculiar way of seeing things, affected by spiritual isolation, but strong enough to impose itself on others through acts or creations. (9)

The "peculiar way of seeing things" overlaps with Jack Babuscio's "Gay Sensibility" (19-20). If being part of a discriminated sexual minority is not a sufficient and necessary reason for producing campy works, it is a very good starting point.

* * *

The relation between Tondelli and camp is outlined in his review of Vittorio Pescatori's novel *L'odalisco*, in the magazine *L'Espresso* :

Nella collana 'Quaderni di critica omosessuale' [...] leggo una documentata ricognizione sul termine "camp" il cui senso è ormai assestato sul recupero raffinato del cattivo gusto, sull'amore sfrontato per il demodé e per le dive di Hollywood: "l'incongruenza è la materia del camp, la teatralità è il suo stile e l'humour la sua strategia". [...] Pescatori sa giostrare con abilità e humour l'eccentricità dei propri materiali camp producendo una narrazione divertente cui non difetta un certo piglio sarcastico. Sa prendere sul serio gli stereotipi del gergo omosessuale per deriderli.²⁷ (3 Sep. 1989: 112-3)

²⁶ The first situations that come to mind which contest Meyer's stance are those of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, of whom it is possible to recall, as apical act of theirs camp aesthetics, the pacifist bed-in protest in support of peace at the Elizabeth Hotel of Montreal, from 26th May to 2nd June, 1969. Much more recently, the overall aesthetics chosen by Madonna and Lady Gaga, who both aim at an intriguing post-modern-camp-look collage.

²⁷ "In the series 'Quaderni di critica omosessuale' [...] I find a solidly documented study on the term "camp." Its sense has now been accepted as the refined

Tondelli here quotes the definition of camp found in *Quaderni di critica omosessuale* edited by Stefano Casi. Besides the unclear paternity of the quotation (attributed by Tondelli to Casi, and not to Newton²⁸), the author recalls Newton's definition of camp and this, together with the application of the concept of camp to the book reviewed for *L'Espresso*, attests to his familiarity with camp. This begs the question: can we find in *Pao Pao* an application of the camp aesthetics as Newton defined it in his review of *L'Odalisco*?

Pao Pao chronicles a lengthy year of compulsory military service of Tondelli's alter-ego: a young gay man from a small provincial town. The protagonist soon discovers that the only enjoyable way to survive the boredom and the absurdities of the military bureaucracy of the barracks (situated in the small city of Orvieto, ironically re-named "Orviet-nam") is to form a "tribe" of close friends to oppose the rigid schemes of the institution. The protagonist and the reader are able to gradually discover the presence of a huge number of other gay guys, both amongst low privates and high officials; within a few pages, gay characters sprout like mushrooms, both in the garrison and outside it. Here—in Orvieto, a town known for its magnificent cathedral—Tondelli sets a good number of hangers-on who accompany the troops in their walks out,²⁹ closely paralleling the habits of the military camp followers of the 19th century, who not only tended to soldiers' horses and tents, but also to their sexual needs. See for example Tom-Tom, described "assieme a quattro-cinque gay dal baffo fremente e dal bicipite suadente che stanno ingurgitando un frappé alla fragolaccia guardandosi attorno come scalmanate" (*Pao Pao* 108).³⁰ Beside the large

retrieval from bad taste, on the impudent love for anything only for the reason that it is outdated and for the Hollywood divas: "Incongruity is the subject of camp, theatricality its style, and humour its strategy." [...] Pescatori toys with the eccentricity of his camp materials with ability and humour, thus producing an entertaining narration which does not lack a certain sarcastic approach. He knows how to seriously consider the stereotypes of the homosexual jargon in order to mock them once he has them at his fingertips." (All of Tondelli's translations are my own and kindly edited by Mr. Giorgio Kostov).

²⁸ Casi correctly attributes the definition to Newton (10), to which follows an academically precise footnote.

²⁹ It should be remembered that Tondelli writes his novel before the diffusion in Italy of gay clubs and the invention of Internet, when the immediate surroundings of military citadels were a very typical—and yet hazardous—place for homosexual cruising.

³⁰ "With four-five edgy-moustache-seductive-biceps gays that swallow an ill-strawberried smoothie while cruising the place as a bunch of hyper teen chicks."

number of openly gay characters of the novel, what matters here is all homosexual activity is accepted, canonical, *en plein air* and even “filodif-fusa” from “Radionaja” (aired by soldiers’ gossip). In the episode between La Baffina (The Little She-Moustache) and Miss Sorriso (Miss Smile)—two privates whose nicknames are clearly telling—the conclusion is: “Se lo è trascinato la sera al Giolitti³¹ hanno parlato e sono diventati amici e Radionaja spettegola che questo baci benissimo, ma faccia solo quello, non gli tira e non lo prende, va be’ accontentiamoci” (121).³² A little later, the protagonist notes: “Insomma il nostro giro di consorelle della patria comincia in quel periodo ad allargarsi a macchia d’olio, le storie s’intrecciano, arriveranno sempre nuove prede e noi ci divertiremo. Il senso di trovarsi in un continente spensierato di chire arzille” (123).³³ In short, we can say that *Pao Pao* is a novel on how to *homosexualize* a military base or, better, on a military base that *homosexualizes* itself; this for sure is a very incongruous subject matter.

It is critical to notice the style and the strategy of *Pao Pao*. Its many gay characters are presented as peacefully gay and not as pathologically homosexual. This distinction between “gays” and “homosexuals” draws on Annamarie Jagose’s terminology of gay “as a non-clinical descriptor unburdened by the pathologizing history of sexuality” (73)—a classification that is valid not only for the protagonist, but also for the secondary characters. For instance, Tondelli’s introduction of René, “La Baffina”:

un altro ragazzo del nostro stesso scaglione che stava ora in un magazzino dei Lancieri a Tor di Quinto ed era siciliano e intellettuale e naturalmente innamorato di Beaujean che un po’ lo snobbava e lo smollava e dava anche appuntamenti buchi le domeniche alla spiaggia di Ostia in mezzo a tutte le maligne del Buco. (*Pao Pao* 96)

another dude of our same echelon, a guy who was now working in a storage for the unit of Lancers at Tor di Quinto; he was Sicilian and an intellectual and naturally in love with Beaujean who was rather snobbish with

³¹ Giolitti is a gay cruising place of Rome.

³² “He dragged him out to Giolitti, they talked and became friends and Radiodraft gossips that this guy is a great kisser, but only kisses, he doesn’t top and he doesn’t bottom, oh well, we’ll have to make do.”

³³ “So in that time, our tribe of patriot sisters begins to expand as an oil slick, stories intertwine, new preys will come and come, and we’ll have fun. Getting the gist of finding ourselves in a worry-free continent of alerted old queers.” Linguistically, it needs to be noted Tondelli’s use of the gay-jargon from Reggio Emilia “chire” to define, from within, what in Italian might be called “checche” and in English “sissies” or, more phonically connected to “chire,” queers.

him, so he used to dump him and set him up³⁴ on Sundays at Ostia beach among all the bad chicks from the Hole.³⁵

This description is then followed by the arrival of Maurizio, soon nicknamed “Miss Smile.” This time the nickname, with its usual change of gender, comes when Little She-Moustache pays Maurizio a compliment while looking at his “bel culotto stupendo, così bianco in confronto all’abbronzatura generale,” (“stunning lil’ ass, so white compared to the general tanning”) in the shower room. Maurizio replies with a complacent smile and gay-coded message: “ha detto che era merito del sole di Ostia. Figuratevi, da lì al Buco il gioco è fatto.”³⁶ Miss Smile’s introduction follows:

[Miss Sorriso] è un ragazzone di ventitrè anni molto americano nell’aspetto, ipernutrito, con la mascella larga e un po’ cadente, i denti piccoli e aguzzi, le labbra carnose, le spalle imbottite. Pare sia un campione di nuoto o qualcosa di simile, ad esser sincero l’espressione ebete da pesce ce l’ha proprio tutta, è certo che è pederasta, insomma se la fa coi ragazzini massimo tredicenni. Il Pedé non è simpatico a nessuno non certo per via dei suoi gusti — che sono certo prelibati — quanto piuttosto perché insiste nel dire che lui non fa le cose con i suoi amichetti del corso ‘Nuoto e Tuffi’, ma li ama, semplicemente li ama. E tutti noi a dire ok, questo va bene, però spiegati meglio. E lui a fare tutta una menata... (121)

[Miss Smile] is a big guy, 23y.o., very American looking, overfed, with a broad and hanging jaw, small sharp teeth, full lips, stuffed shoulders. Seems he’s a swimming champion or something alike, and to be quite honest the dull fish expression is all there, and sure thing he’s a pederast, he sniffs around for under-13 boys. No one really likes the *pedé* but certainly not for his tastes—that are exquisite indeed—but because he insists in asserting that he doesn’t score with his little fellas of the ‘Swim and Dives’ course, but he just loves them, he simply loves them. And the rest of us commenting: ok, sure, but explain yourself a lil’ better. And he harps on about himself...

Here we find a typical characteristic of camp, that is, love for excess and the recovering of bad taste, two elements that frame the character of the “pedé” i.e. the pederast, who is partial to teens and under age kids. Here, the author dares to label the tastes of his character as “exquisite indeed” but he

³⁴ Literally, “giving him a hole” in Italian.

³⁵ “The Hole”, a.k.a. “Il Buco,” is a beach at Ostia famous to be a gay cruising place near Rome.

³⁶ “He said he had to thank the sun of Ostia. Come on, from there to the Hole Beach, it’s a walk in the park!”

stigmatizes them by pointing out that Miss Smile denies having sex with “his little fellas of the ‘Swim and Dives’ course” and hides behind the mask of a supposedly Platonic love. The protagonist does not believe this hypothesis, but Tondelli does not linger, he goes on with the novel.

No one is missing in the gay panorama, not even some of the dreaded officers like Major Lieutenant Bianchin, who are capable of playing their own camp trick:

Ma il Bianchin è stato spassosissimo quel pomeriggio d’ozio estivo in cui si chiacchierava all’ombra delle verdi palme della Macao, lui sul muricciolo, in piedi per potermi guardare dritto dritto negli occhi e mantenere almeno lì la superiorità di grado [...] e mentre s’era lì a ciacolar lui continuava a salutare a destra e manca sfavillando l’occhio vispo e facendo strizzatine di bocca a questo e quello e agitando la manina all’indirizzo di certi bonazzi in shorts da libera uscita [...] mentre siamo lì nel piazzale esotico a un certo punto si fa serio, si china un po’ e mi dice: ‘Carini ghe semo, mettitì sull’attenti che arriva n’altra sorea!’ e io ridacchiando mi volto e vedo avanzare leggiadro un certo Maggiore e allora mi rabbuio e batto il tacco e quello: ‘Comodo, comodo soldatuccio manchiam solo del tè, né?’ (143-4)

And Bianchin was really funny that lazy summer afternoon when we were chatting under the shadow of the green palms within the Macao barracks. He stood on the low wall so to be able to look at me straight in the eyes and to keep his grade superiority, at least in that state of affairs [...] and while we were there chit-chatting, he kept saying hello to this one and that one, waving his soft, petite hand towards certain hot looking chunks in off-duty shorts [...] and while we were in the exotic forecourt, at a certain point he becomes all serious and in dialect he goes: “We’re so cute, ain’t we?, but now stand at attention, here comes another sista” and I giggle, turn my head and see advancing gliding another certain Major Lieutenant, so I darken and clap my heels, and the Officer goes: “Easy, easy, young lil’ first-class, we just miss some tea indeed, don’t we?”

With the very unlikely homophile and homosexual “capitulation” of the Major Lieutenant Bianchin—described up to that point of the novel as the mean alien one, the superior officer—the panorama of the Tondellian characters goes beyond the line of the satire and extend to the field of the gay-carnavalesque or, in more precise critical term—camp. Luigi Levrini has noted that both in the popular tradition of Emilian literature and in the culture of carnival, there is a strict relation “fra corpo, terra, comico e grottesco, fiosologico e sessuale”³⁷ (24) that has a “potente carica trasgres-

³⁷ “Between body, soil, comic and grotesque, physiological and sexual.”

siva e di rivolta.”³⁸ According to Levrini, the transgressive riot element appears in Tondelli’s *Altri libertini* and *Camere separate*. Nonetheless, if in *Camere separate* it is rather difficult to identify the “carnavalesque” mentioned by Levrini, certainly in *Pao Pao* it is straightforward. In *Pao Pao*, the powerful transgressive riot element spotted by Levrini is prevalent, and expressed in camp aesthetics. Therefore, the novel’s point of view on its society emerges clearly and self-ironically, through a paradox: the fort, the homophobic institution *par excellence*,³⁹ is reduced to a hybrid compound. The Tondellian military camp becomes something buffoonish and really new where, in fact, gay recruits openly enjoy themselves and their sexual orientation, creating endless occasions to have sexual fun. Consequently, it is possible to maintain that the novel falls within the boundaries of the “Emilian tradition,” mentioned by Levrini. Tondelli’s text mirrors and adopts the “exaggerated, anarchical language,” i.e. that camp aestheticism, where a grotesque relationship between soil (here, the military camp) and body in uniform comes into existence. A relationship that is both physiological and (homo)sexual. The theatrical style and the humorous strategy are also confirmed by other camp descriptions of Tondellian draftees. Contrary to what Derek Duncan (109-10) claims, the gay identity in *Pao Pao* is often exposed as a joyful banner; this idea makes it possible to ridicule the feigned austerity of the military institution. Thus, the Tondellian garrison turns into a wonderful place where it is easy to go gay cruising *en plein air*, as Major Lieutenant Bianchin has proven. The following passage—where the author introduces “The She-Beautiful Perotto,” as a “six foot big chunk from Piedmont, with really smooth, long and rolling legs like his R’s and his S’s”—relates to the gayety of the barracks:

Comunque la Bella Perotto io la ricordo ai tempi del Car perché al mattino mentre tutti i maschi granatieri si perdevano in abluizioni del cosciotto e in lavacri dell’ascella in tutto giubilo e un tripudio del gluteo, dell’anca e del polpaccio, lui compassato e in completa souplesse si rifaceva le sopracciglia e si passava il fondotinta sull’acne spacciandolo per crema curativa. E stava sempre alle calcagna del Beaujean anche quando lo misero di Nucleo Controllo Cucina a distribuire le merende ai soldati e un giorno passò Jean senza salutarlo e questa lo rincorse per tutto il bancone del self-service strillando: ‘La mevvendina, tò la mevvendina’ agitando in aria un paio di croissant impacchettati, con il maresciallo di

38 “A transgressive, powerful riot element.”

39 In this sense it is here interesting to recall Steven Zeeland’s works (1993; 1995; 1996), which highlight the striking difference in gay imagination between the army barracks and the navy environment. See in particular: Zeeland 1996, 145-66.

controllo che faceva occhi severissimi e il tenente di picchetto che quasi svenne nel vedere questa pazza con il grembiolino biancolercio correre tra i fornelli e le marmitte sollevandolo come una sottana e sculettando come una vecchia troja. (*Pao Pao* 97-8)

However, I recall the She-Beautiful Perotto during the Recruit Training Centre, because at mornings, while all the virile grenadiers were losing themselves in ablutions of their firm thigh, and in cleansing of the armpit in a fine jubilee and in an exultation of the buttock, of the haunch, and of the calf, he—composed and in total suppleness—gave himself an accurate eyebrow job and applied pancake on his acne passing it off for curative cream. And he was constantly on Beaujean's tail, even when they stationed him at the Kitchen Control Nucleus. Once, as he was distributing snacks to soldiers, Jean passed by without greeting him and she run after him along the entire self-service counter screeching "*Youv bvveack-fast*, 'ere you go *youv bvveackfast*" waving in the air a couple of packed croissants, with the checking warrant officer that made bull-eyes at her while the orderly lieutenant almost fainted in seeing this madwoman with her little white, filthy apron running among the stoves and the stockpots lifting it up as a petticoat and sashaying down the runway as an old whore.

It is evident, the homosexual subjects of *Pao Pao*, beginning with "the She-Beautiful Perotto," use their body as a rainbow banner, showing in any single gesture or action that they could not care less about the rigors of the military frame. As was the case of Beaujean, Miss Smile & company, the description of the She-Beautiful Perotto clearly intends to subvert rigid masculine authority and hierarchy, by pointing out its artificial status as a performative construct. By doing this, all the characters in *Pao Pao* embody a "specifically queer cultural critique," to use Meyer's words (1). In addition, this gay show-off, which was first introduced as peculiar to a few privates, becomes the identifying element of the whole *Pao Pao* battalion. This is the moment in which the camp component of Tondelli's novel becomes crystal clear, especially when Philip Core's fourth "camp rule" (previously quoted) is re-introduced: "Camp is essential to military discipline" (7). Core refers not only to the drag tradition of military theatre, but also to the fundamental attention, in military discipline, dedicated to the content and aesthetics of uniforms. An attention bleeding into a form of narcissism—as Zeeland's studies have demonstrated (101-26). Uniforms, in any kind of body of troops, are essential to the visibility, identity, establishing, and recognizing of different nationalities, corps, grades, and mansions. In *Pao Pao*, Tondelli emphasizes in various pages the peculiar attention to the polish and tidiness of the uniform required by military institution. In an

overtly camp way, the writer links this aesthetical attention to uniforms, with the interest for drag and transvestitisms and any kind of garment. Tondelli's soldiers not only show tolerance towards their gay fellows, but also participate in a Dionysian collective rite to the gay show staged in the barracks:

E invece Miguel racconta tutta la solfa del Pitti-uomo con Beaujean che dopo il contrappello indossa tutte le divise militari comprese quelle della parata storica e corre per tutto il corridoio di compagnia dicendo ecco signori il completo invernale, cappottino stile coloniale color kaki e alamari rosso carminio argentati, ecco lo stile estivo camicina e pettorina verdegrigia e calzoncini in gabardine antipioggia, cinturino in corda intrecciata, ecco lo stile primaverile primosole... e tutti a batter le mani e gridare e farsi in quattro per aiutarlo a prepararsi mentre la bolgia acclama e scalpita tanto che dopo un po' tutti sfilavano per il corridoio come mannequin, con i soliti najoni senza misura che tutti nudi si mettono il cazzo fra le cosce e così pare che tutto il reggimento sia d'improvviso passato giù di là per Casablanca... (119-20)

Instead, Miguel tells the same old story of the 'Pitti-man fashion event' with Beaujean that after the second roll-call wears and cat-walks all the military uniforms, included the ones for the historical parade, and runs all along the barracks corridor shouting: *and here, dear sirs, here you go the winter outfit, an exquisite colonial-style lil' coat in kaki colour with red carmine and silver frogs; here you go the summer style, greengray lil' shirt and lil' bib in anti-rain gabardine, lil' belt in interwoven string; here you go the first-sun style...* and all around soldiers clapping and shouting and bending over backwards to help him gearing up, while the mob acclaims and champs at the bit at the point that after a while all were modeling along the runaway as mannequins, with the typical know-no-limits old privates who, all naked, and with the dick hidden between their thighs, looked as if the entire regiment had already paid a visit to Casablanca...

Furthermore, in this and other similar passages throughout the novel, we find a reversal of the "Panopticon" apparatus described by Foucault in *Surveiller et punir*. The prisoners of the Panopticon try hard to be well-behaved because they know they are being observed from the central tower, and they fear a possible punishment. In the Tondellian barracks, instead, gay privates have no fear of being spotted in their effeminate revealing mannerisms. Rather, as the camp lesson teaches, they show off their homosexuality and are proud of it. This is, in itself, a political stance, especially when affirmed in a military environment. This is what Beaujean shows to the rest of the world running through the corridors of the institution in his fake military fashion *défilé*, which ends to be a perfect hybrid: both a

parade and a show. By emphasizing the peculiar attention devoted by the army's and the transvestites' communities to uniforms and décor, Tondelli clearly intends to connect two realities that could not be more different. In *Pao Pao*, these two worlds come together in the character of the She-Beautiful Perotto. A reflection by Jack Babuscio helps us to see this connection clearly: "Clothes and décor, for example, can be a means of asserting one's identity, as well as a form or justification in a society which denies one's essential validity" (23). In a footnote, the critic relates this consideration to the reading of Esther Newton's PhD dissertation in Urban Anthropology on drag queens, later published as *Mother Camp*. Babuscio's reflection can easily be extended and adapted to the military world, of conscription soldiers. For new soldiers, in fact, one of the very first and most important rites is the assignment of their uniform. Abandoning civilian clothes and wearing the military garments, clearly marks the passage between civilian and military life. The implicit message in donning military clothing is that one is no longer perceived as an individual, and begins to be part of a larger body—the military one. Tondelli describes this rite in a passage (25-9) that is too long to be reproduced in its entirety here. The passage, which has virtually no periods and proceeds with various lists of items separated by commas and semicolons, describes this rite as one of the most chaotic moments of the military regimen—a rite that should, on the contrary, set and show the proper organization and precision of the institution. It is precisely in this part of *Pao Pao* that all the characters understand for the first time how loose, unfit and rough the entire military service is going to be: the mere task of giving each soldier two pairs of each piece of garment, in his proper size, becomes an impossible mission. Again, Tondelli links the final stage of the clothing rite to a fashion show, this time performed before and under the supervision of one of the very few women in the novel:

C'è dunque una signora molto decisa nell'aspetto, sui cinquanta e passa, grassotta, occhialuta e kapò che ficca le mani dappertutto, stropiccia i bicipidi [sic], carino metti quello che ti vedo, togli quello, e corre come un'ossessa fra un séparé e l'altro, dà il benestare, bisogna farsi vedere con la drop completa, con la mimetica, con l'estiva, con la tuta di servizio, mettersi in coda e sfilarle davanti, lei controlla. I soldati della vestizione corrono da lei e dicono "Comandi signora" e lei "Cocco mio a questo toro gli hai dato una terza, ma cosa pensi, cosa fai, via una quinta, presto presto!" "Comandi signora, bene signora". (27)

Here there's a lady, with a very firm look, around fifty or more, plump, four-eyed and with a kapò-attitude who plunges her hands everywhere, rubs everyone's biceps, *hon, put on that and lemme see, take that off*, and

she runs as a possessed person between a room divider and the other, she gives [every soldier] the official approval. You needed her green light while wearing the complete olive-drab, the camouflage fatigues, the summer's, the overalls, as you lined up and modeled in front of her, as she checked on you. The clothing warehouse's soldiers run towards her and scream "Yes ma'am" and she goes "Bambino, you gave a third size to this bull? But where is your mind, what are you doing, come on with a fifth, quick, quick!" "Yes ma'am! Very well ma'am".

The civilian woman in the passage carries out two main functions: first, she is the only and final arbiter of the military clothing rite, the one who "dà il benessere" (gives the official approval),⁴⁰ and as such, she also commands over the male soldiers of the warehouse, who are eager to obey. Thus, she is clearly the woman in charge, and she is introduced as the mistress of the Tondellian fort. Secondly, she embodies a special kind of woman, extremely bossy and judgmental. The entire body of soldiers has to parade-or rather, to model in front of her. In other words Tondelli wants to bring the reader to see that military marching on parade is just another way of modeling, where gender roles are inverted. The theoretical connection between men in uniforms and men in drags is now complete.

In conclusion, camp style, humour, light drugs, and a clear gay subjectivity under a gray-green uniform are the strategies adopted by Tondelli to emphasize the hierarchical and anachronistic absurdities of the compulsory military service. The exaggeration of the camp aesthetics is a literary approach that puts *Pao Pao* in a similar category as famous anti-army American political satires of the Sixties, such as Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, or Richard Hooker's *Mash*, which were meant to give social and cultural visibility to the peace movement and question the ethics of war. Similarly, *Pao Pao*—like the rest of Tondelli's oeuvre—aims at giving social and cultural visibility to the queer minority of Italy and at questioning the ethics of the compulsory military service with its homophobic frame. Certainly in *Pao Pao* Tondelli employs a very different linguistic experimentalism than the one found in *Catch 22* and *Mash*. There is the introduction of a large number of soldiers with telltale nicknames that reveal some of their funny characteristics. While in *Pao Pao* it is difficult to find a character that behaves according to what the institution wants, in *Catch 22* and in *Mash* not all the characters subvert authority and hierarchy. However, American critics agree in considering Heller's and Hooker's works as examples of

⁴⁰ The English translation does not render the military-bureaucratic jargon of the Italian original, though.

politically committed literature, in an anti-army way.⁴¹ Tondelli works similarly in *Pao Pao*, but he uses the camp-gay point of view as a narrative tool that, quite often, fades into the grotesque. See for example when Tondelli makes private Beaujean talk with a failed pronunciation that transforms “Rs” into “Vs” (98). Finally, both Tondelli’s novel and *Mash* share a clear self-diagnosis through the inclusion of an initial declaration. *Pao Pao*’s narrator-protagonist states the reasons for writing his story. The declaration also includes a dedication to his comrades:

Questo è il racconto trafelato di come ci siamo incontrati e di tutte le intensità che ci hanno travolto per quei dodici mesi. È per loro, gli altissimi, che ricordo questa storia che una volta c’era e ora non più. In onore al glorioso e gayoso 4°/80 che riprendo a raccontare. (16)

This is the panting story of how we met and of all the intensities that overcame us during those twelve months. This reminiscence, that once was and now is no longer, is for them—the really tall guys. In honour of the glorious and gayous 4°/80, I start again my narration.

Hooker’s fans may recall that a similar dedication, evidently less on the camp side, also opens the novel *Mash*, whose Italian edition was very popular in the Seventies:

Most of the doctors who worked in Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals during the Korean War were very young, perhaps too young, to be doing what they were doing. [...] A few flipped their lids, but most of them just raised hell, in a variety of ways and degrees. This is a story of some of the ways and degrees. It’s also a story of some of the work. The characters in this book are composites of people I knew, met casually, worked with, or heard about. No one in the book bears more than a coincidental resemblance to an actual person. (5)

Contrary to what Cesare Garboli maintained (2003), in *Pao Pao* there is a real camp manifesto of queer literature—something completely absent from other famous Italian gay novels that either preceded or came after Tondelli’s second novel. A decade later, popular works such as Alessandro Golinelli’s *Basta che paghino* (1992) still present a damned homosexuality as the pivotal element, and all the homosexual characters are either sad or ashamed of whom they are.

In conclusion, *Pao Pao* has often gathered negative judgments, condemning its hedonism, its lightness, or its lack of a structural criticism to

⁴¹ Craig; Worland; Podhoretz; Dempsey.

the military institution. As this study has demonstrated, it is time for a thorough re-evaluation of Tondelli's second novel under the mesmerizing and political light of camp.

University of Ottawa

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