

Finding Camp Alliance through Heterosexual Androgyny

America loves to find an icon to hang its guilt on. But, admittedly, I have assumed the role of Antichrist; I am the Nineties voice of individuality, and people tend to associate anyone who looks and behaves differently with illegal or immoral activity.” -Marilyn Manson

Brian Warner, also known as Marilyn Manson, has one of the most successful careers made from controversy, challenging gender stereotypes, and defiance toward political and religious influence. Brian Warner¹ came onto the music scene with backlash, not afraid to challenge what it meant to be popular in pop culture. Through some of his most successful albums such as *Antichrist Superstar*, *The Mechanical Animals*, *The Pale Emperor*, and most recently *We Are Chaos*; Warner has challenged political regimes and made a mockery of the cult-like influence of religion. Aside from music, Warner has also found success in television, he had recurring roles on shows such as *Sons of Anarchy*, he is a successful watercolor artist with art exhibitions held throughout Europe, and successfully created his version of the alcohol absinthe, *Mansinthe*. Warner has been branded a style icon having modeled for designers such as Marc Jacobs, and Saint Laurent, and was featured in campaigns for *Vogue Magazine*. Some of Warner's most iconic looks draw inspiration from David Bowie, Disney, extra-terrestrials, provocateurs, mall goth, and burlesque to name a few.

With such a range of artistic endeavors, and not knowing what Marilyn Manson looks like, these attributes seem to be what most successful rock and hip-hop artists contribute to society. Warner's gender ambiguity, androgynous features, and complete rejection of heteronormative ideals were focal points for mainstream media. Thus, I want to expand the conversation on the objectivity society has instilled in Marilyn Manson, creating a separation from a performance artist to the dangerous freak the mainstream media has often labeled him. While given the criticism and objectivity that Marilyn Manson has received throughout his entire career for his physical appearance and gender defiance, how do we make sense of the influence and iconic status he maintains despite that?

Brian Warner is an artist first, and his career at first glance can appear reckless, savage, and demonic; it will be surprising to understand that his creative expression, song lyrics, moral philosophies, and appearance were contrasting with how society perceived them. In 1964 Susan Sontag wrote an essay titled “Notes on Camp” which brought a lot of attention to camp identity where she states: “Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which things can be taken.” (Sontag 5). Brian Warner completely embodied this idea with his chosen stage name Marilyn Manson. Warner drew inspiration from Marilyn Monroe and Charles Manson. In an essay Warner wrote for *Rolling Stone Magazine* (Manson 1999) in response to the Columbine school shooting titled “Columbine: Who's Fault Was It?” he states: “The name Marilyn Manson has never celebrated the sad fact that America puts killers on the cover of *Time Magazine*, giving them as much notoriety as our favorite movie stars.” (Manson). It was easier for society to assume Warner had a fascination with serial killers than to gain a deeper understanding of the juxtaposition his chosen name meant. Although his name was widely criticized, the momentum of his success proved that the disapproval the media portrayed of him didn't match the popularity he was gaining. Warner was mocking the mass media by mirroring the hypocrisy and despair he felt over America glorifying serial killers. In this essay, I will demonstrate how Marilyn Manson's offensive androgynous identity in proximity to his influence and success are the essence of an alliance to camp.

¹ Brian Warner is Marilyn Manson's legal name. Warner owns the copyright of “Marilyn Manson” which is the entity of everything he owns and has created with the likeness of Marilyn Manson. Some publications use this as his given name. I will reference him as both depending on the context.

The culture war on Marilyn Manson was at its peak when the media glorified the suffering and tragedy of the Columbine High School mass shooting, then directly blamed Manson, claiming his music influenced the school shooters. Warner, who has never promoted gun violence, in contrast, condemns killing especially out of righteousness; he said the following about the incident: "America loves to find an icon to hang its guilt on. But admittedly, I have assumed the role of Antichrist; I am the Nineties voice of individuality, and people tend to associate anyone who looks and behaves differently with illegal or immoral activity." (Manson). Richard Dyer who also wrote an essay proceeding Sontag had an opposing view on what it means to be camp. Dyer does not agree with camp being an aesthetic and gives camp exclusivity to the white gay male. While I can agree with Dyer's sentiment of what it means to be camp, limiting it only to gay men further isolates artists like Manson who represent a demographic of straight men who don't conform to cis-male normativity. Manson being straight did not protect him from what he identifies as "the witch hunt." It is through the personification of camp aesthetics, and the authentic identity in Warner's gender ambiguity that did not align in society. In Richard Dyer's essay "It Is So Camp As Keeps Us Going" he said this: "camp is a way of being human, without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role."(Dyer 49). Dyer goes on to say "Identity and togetherness, fun and wit, self-protection and thorns in the flesh of straight society – these are the pluses of camp."(50). Despite Warner identifying his sexual preference as straight, his refusal to conform almost cost him his career when he became the scapegoat for The Columbine School shooting. This is the exact representation of what it means for an artist to long for togetherness while being the thorn in society.

Brian Warner had reached a career peak just six months before the Columbine Massacre with his release of the studio album *The Mechanical Animals* in 1998. It is essential to take a closer look at the production of this album which perpetuated the culture war against Warner, while simultaneously solidifying his fan base. Warner created some of the most iconic, controversial pieces of art to date within this album. *The Mechanical Animals* functioned as a fictional story following two characters who are the same character- Adam. Omega (Figure 1) is the protagonist- a ziggystardust-inspired androgynous alien, and a famous rockstar; an alpha representation of Marilyn Manson (Figure 2). The Alpha represented the sentiment Warner had around his feelings of despair and emptiness he experienced around making Antichrist Superstar and the feelings of human observation treating him like a mechanical animal. The most iconic piece of art is the album cover for *The Mechanical Animals*, which displays Omega naked as an androgynous alien. Warner was covered in latex where he was given prosthetic breasts, and his male anatomy was covered and appeared to be removed. In addition to being influenced by Ziggy-Stardust (the alter-ego to David Bowie), Warner drew inspiration from David Bowie's glam rock era where Warner was quoted in *Revolver Magazine* (*Revolver* 2018) saying the following: "We didn't set out to translate any specific thing, we just wanted to make a very theatrical and bombastic record, and not be afraid to be over the top or pretentious because I think that's what rock & roll is supposed to be."(Manson). Which Warner effectively did. In true Manson controversy, the album was banned from the biggest retailers of that time; Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Target. The naked alien with mismatched genitalia was not a concept these companies were willing to endorse. Regarding the music, it was massively successful, it debuted at #1 on the Billboard Top 100 charts, taking the #1 spot from Lauren Hill with her album *The Miseducation of Lauren Hill*, which had one of the most successful album debuts in music history. The amount of character art Warner put into this album can demonstrate what Sontag means by: "Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence- a person being one very intense thing." (9). Warner's persona of Marilyn Manson was so intense, for this moment it had to take on another persona as Adam the Omega.



Figure 1. Omēga



Figure 2. Alpha

The coveted place, Dyer finds himself within an identity to camp like Warner, is a space for protection where a man can be both the Omēga and the Alpha. While I agree it can be disingenuous to make camp something of stylization and an aesthetic, I also agree with Susan Sontag when she claims that “the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity.” (11). Both can be true at the same time. Knowing what camp is and admiring the things that make it ugly or vulgar, is proving admiration and understanding of the ideas around camp Dyer tries to make. Can someone only be camp if they’re participating in camp with no self-awareness? I would argue further that Warner embodies everything Dyer claims to value about camp: “What I value about camp is that it is precisely a weapon against the mystique surrounding art, royalty and masculinity: it cocks an irresistible snook, it demystifies by playing up the artifice by means of which such things as these retain their hold on the majority of the population.” (52). If we followed Dyer’s strong assumption that camp only applies to gay men, someone like Warner who is an ally would be shunned. With everything mentioned thus far, Manson is what Dyer would call; a cocky snook slaying art, royalty, and masculinity to demystify the mass population from conformity. Instead of seeing Warner as an outsider because he identifies as straight, his ally-ship can be seen as the bridge that started the normalcy for straight men in pop culture to exude androgyny.

Marilyn Manson also changed what it meant to be androgynous. He does not possess societal ideals of beauty or handsome; he represents the opposite. His appearance is raunchy, vulgar, and intimidating. Ironically being the very things pop culture couldn’t get enough of. Spotting some of the masterpieces of performative art that may have only existed for a moment, are crucial to understanding Warner’s camp alliance. If you can imagine a time when androgynous aliens and cis males wearing makeup and corsets became somewhat tolerated allowing Manson to regularly perform at the MTV Music Awards; Warner penetrates through this personage and swings the pendulum into mass media couture acceptance. Warner was featured in *Vogue Magazine* (*Vogue* 2006) celebrating his marriage to his then-wife Dita Von Teese, wearing a John Galliano suit (Figure 5), then again in May

2020. Vogue referenced this issue as an editorial favorite. In 2013 Manson became the new face of Saint Laurent (Figure 3). The brand released a 90's reminiscent collection, solidifying Manson helped define 90's fashion and culture. In his more recent contributions to fashion, in 2016 Marc Jacobs selected Manson for his fall 2016 campaign (Figure 4), stating the following: "In direct contrast to the outward hideous beauty of Manson's stage persona is his instinctive, inherent intelligence and understanding of what matters."(Jacobs). This perfectly sums up Marilyn Manson's stake in pop culture.



Figure 3. Manson as the face of Saint Laurent



Figure 4. Manson in Marc Jacobs fashion show

Lastly, if we reflect on Warner's relationship to the role makeup played for the persona Manson had on stage or in Vogue, it can be determined that at times Warner was also in camp alliance with what Pamela Robertson argues in her essay "What Makes the Feminist Camp?" what camp is for women. Robertson says that "she takes camp to be a queer discourse because it possibly enables heterosexual men to express their discomfort and alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture." (Robertson 271). In an interview Warner did for Fader Magazine (Fader 2015) he talks in detail about his relationship with makeup. He says: "I remember going into the MAC store and being very excited. I bought this foundation that they don't make anymore, and lipliner and lipstick. I've been using MAC's Diva lipstick since they invented the color (Figure 6)." (Manson). For any person who has a relationship with makeup, MAC makeup specifically, can relate to the nostalgic excitement and adrenaline from buying makeup for the first time at a makeup counter. He goes on to say, "he wears makeup the same way a woman does, he does not wear it in terms to look more feminine, but rather it's the way he likes to look." (Manson). Warner has offered women a better stake in camp, by reinforcing his femininity through the female form as a straight male. This perspective supports what Robertson says about camp femininity: "Camp has an affinity with feminist discussions of performance and enactment; thereby examining camp as a feminist practice." (269) Manson did not experience this through the imitation of a gay man. It supports the acceptance for straight men to embrace different levels of androgyny, not because they are pulling inspiration from gay men, but instead embracing femininity in the same place as a female, not to impersonate a female.



Figure 5. Manson in Vogue Magazine



Figure 6. Manson and his father both wearing "Diva"

Brian Warner has undoubtedly changed pop culture, through an identity of camp by Robertson, Sontag, and Dyer's definition. Although Warner may not be a perfect example of any one definition, he most certainly is an ally to all three and should be recognized as such. Contrary to defending that Warner needs a safe space in society as a straight white male, it should be the traits of his innate privilege that Robertson and Dyer use to amalgamate camp identities and social acceptance. Manson has served as a vessel exposing camp to demographics of society that through privilege and bias have and will continue to inherently offer Warner endorsement. Society saw a straight white male cross-dress, wear makeup, and kiss boys for shock value, while in relationships with cis-women, and despite what the media tries to portray, Marilyn Manson was embraced by the world at large. Warner has created avenues to be politically defiant, androgynous, hideously beautiful in couture campaigns, masculine, feminine, and any version of that in between.

