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What WOZ

Lost Objects, Repeat Viewings, and the Sissy Warrior

Representation always follows two laws: it conveys more than it intends and it is never totalizing.

—Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*

Nobody likes a sissy. That includes dykes, faggots, and feminists of both sexes.

—Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*



Judy Garland as Dorothy in
The Wizard of Oz—with Toto

*It's like you could read
what's inside me*

To see again.

To go to a movie repeatedly is to reenter a previously inhabited world—a darkened space constructed of conscious fondness, unconscious memory, the materiality of visual representations, the subjectivity of identifications with one's spectator-companions. To see a movie again is not simply to revisit an old site, or to confirm a truth of perception once held and now lost, but to construct anew a space of common laughter, stillness, breathing. To see a movie repeatedly is to re-spatialize the body, to breathe together with others who may have shared this movie too, and to breathe again with the lost first-spectator you once were. Reviewing film is a negotiated practice, upsetting and re-figuring stable definitions of time (as linear), history (as fixed), spatial relationships (as synchronic), identity (as transcendent).

*You're out of the woods,
You're out of the dark,
You're out of the night*

I'm guessing that every white middle-class gay man has his own Judy Garland story. This is mine: One day when I was five years old, and living on Guam, my mother told me Judy Garland had died. I panicked. I said to my mother, "But that means they'll never show *The Wizard of Oz* again." To me, every time the film was shown on television, something was really happening, somewhere. I had absolutely no dialectic relationship to film—I didn't believe the object bore an indexical relationship to the pro-filmic site; I didn't know I was being sutured into a passive desiring subject position by the ideology of the Classical Hollywood apparatus; I had no idea that "I" had already been constructed in language, playing a *fort/da* game between being and meaning. I only knew I wanted the movie to *happen*, again. There was something else that day. As I was having my five-year-old existential crisis over the reality of the film event, in New York City a clutch of drag queens, mourning the death of Garland in their own way, were—through the politically savvy use of media representations—transforming themselves with anarchic fury from victims of the closet into Stonewall rioters.



Bert Lahr as the
Cowardly Lion.

Photo: John Kobal Stills Collection

The simplistic causality is often mythologized: the drag queens in Greenwich Village, crying into their cocktails as one in the ultimate Garlandian tribute to their fallen icon, rise up as one and collectively begin shifting the signification of "gay" from victim to equality-demanding rioter.¹ Out-of-the-closets-and-into-the-streets! where the defining and protective darkness of the bar, the fantasy-producing movie theater, and suffocating childhood homes are all hopefully obliterated in the act of pouring out of the pitch black of a metaphorical closet and into the brightness of a very real street with very real material properties. The romantic connection between Garland's death and the beginning of a national gay rights movement in the United States temptingly fuses fields of politics, psychoanalysis, history, and aesthetic pleasure, providing a defining moment of narrative clarity for this movement. The mythological trajectory I would seem to have been caught in—that of a five-year-old, not-yet-but-soon-to-be-gay boy being hailed unknowingly by a group of rioting drag queens singing "Come out, come out, wherever you are"—would not catch up to me until 25 years later, when I viewed *The Wizard of Oz* again in the darkness of San Francisco's Castro Theatre.

*I'm afraid there's no denyin'
I'm just a dandy-lion,
A fate I don't desoive*

As Mark Rappaport shows in his documentary film *The Silver Screen: Color Me Lavender* (1998), while Hollywood in the 30s and 40s had numerous uses for the sissy as a stereotypical character (the dandy butler, the gossipy gadfly, the effete snob), it couldn't handle tying the portrayal of a homosexual to the narrative center of a film. The threat (or non-threat) to "normal" men of feminine emotional excess was played out in characters visibly marked as homosexual, but while the genre of the female melodrama was in force in the 30s and 40s, anything like a sissy melodrama was nonexistent: sissy-subjectivity was most definitely found only in the margins, absorbed by the "low" genres comedic and musical.

How then does "sissy" come to mean "effeminate man," and why would sissy necessarily get aligned with "homosexual"? In fact, why did Hollywood need to display sissified homosexuality at all? Positioned outside a direct association with adult homosexuality

as Bert Lahr's performance is (situated as it is in a fantasy scenario, appealing as it does to identity-forming children), his Cowardly Lion may reveal more about the construction of gay subjectivity than a realistic representation of a homosexual itself. As Richard Dyer has pointed out in *The Matter of Images*, a society can only make sense of itself, indeed constructs itself, through social consensus over the meaning of aesthetic representations recognizable as stereotypes. *The Wizard of Oz's* stereotype of sissiness, the Cowardly Lion, operates both as an aesthetic (the character of the Cowardly Lion) and a social construct (a production of the sissy type). Lahr's performance, however, operates both within and beyond the text, and between the text and spectator, such that "sissy" and "effeminate" negotiate with the dominant modes of both the film and society. The performance deftly produces and upsets the act of stereotyping itself, whose ideological purpose is "to make the invisible visible, so there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm, and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit."²

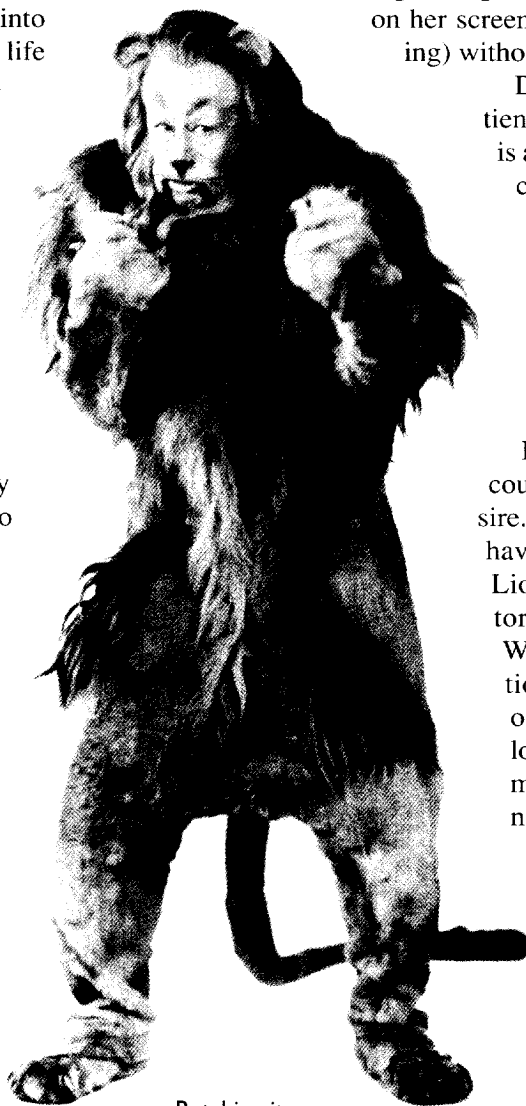
In his first scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, the Cowardly Lion is a figure at war with his own desires, producing an excess, in body and voice, of sissiness. Desperate to display himself as male and make invisible all feminine characteristics, the Lion is a flurry of contradictory gestures and vocal inflections. On his first entrance, the Lion attacks the other travelers in an exaggerated way; this ornamentally masculine bullying goes on for three minutes to the point of comic excess in what will soon be revealed to be an overdetermination, a compensation for the character's essential effeminacy. For children watching the film, the Lion is every bully they encountered in every playground in the world, exposed as a girly-lion, or, in the Lion's words, "a sissy," when Dorothy bops him on the nose with her parental "Shame on you." The Lion's gestures immediately shift from aggressive male (the crouched fighting position, the fists, the snarling teeth) to sissy boy (groping his own tail/penis, bursting into tears). As the Lion goes on to explain, it is not as simple as putting on an act, for to be a real man, to "*be a lion, not a mou-ess*" (italics mine) requires something elusive, something absent, something perhaps the Wizard can bestow. It is not courage the Lion lacks, it is essential masculinity. It is not cowardice the Lion possesses, but femininity in the insidious form of sissiness. The Lion is aware of how his body is being read: his gesture on the line "I'm just a dandy-lion" is a

stereotypical limp wrist, a kind of inversion of the clenched fist and a way of giving himself the finger.

He also signifies sissy in his voice. Lahr's vocal excess on the "ess" in "mouse" comically feminizes mouse as a clear counterpoint to what a lion should be, essentially. This vocal excess overflows the character and the bounds of the narrative. In his first scene, Lahr's Lion wails, whips, trills, and fawns, bursting into effusive tears on such lines as "My life has been simply *unbearable*." The result is undeniably comic, and the ways in which generations of spectators have embraced the Cowardly Lion suggests the representation is probably benign. I also wish to note here the powerful message that most bullies are really cowards, a value the film conveys comedically even within my critique. However, the melodramatic excess is displayed not only for comic effect; it also works to show that what is underneath the joke, what is underneath the artifice, what is (to quote Dyer) invisible is also profoundly threatening.

The Lion is marked as a sissy who holds the group back in the pathetic throes of his own panic and the desire for security, all the more frustrating to fellow travelers on the Yellow Brick Road and comic to spectators because of the obvious disparity between the ferocity of the signifier "lion" and this comically aberrational signified. Just before Dorothy bops the Lion on the nose, revealing him to be both a sissy and a bully, the shot reveals visual plenitude (the depth and richness of the forest, the abundance of aural cues, and all four main characters in the frame). Immediately after Dorothy strikes the Lion, the camera cuts to the Lion's face. Dorothy is looking at him but we never see her reaction; her eyes are just outside the viewer's field of vision. Thus at the same moment we are given the plenitude of his re-

sponse to her slap through the closeup, we are denied the sight of her gaze—her eyes are the absent field. We do not get a reverse shot of Dorothy's face to suture us back, and this lack, this desire, haunts the Lion throughout the film. He is, of course, doing it for Dorothy. The film continues to construct the Lion as a viewed object through its use of the Witch's magic image ball, which can spy on the object on her screen (frequently it is the Lion crying) without being seen.



Butching it up.

Dorothy and the others are patient with the Cowardly Lion, who is allowed his indulgences and excesses, be they emotional (fits of tears), verbal ("Wouldn't you be ashamed to be seen in the company of a cowardly lion? I would"), or material (running away, fainting, pitching himself through glass windows). But ultimately the Lion's wish isn't only about courage, it's about gender, and desire. "It's been in me so long, I just have to tell you how I feel," the Lion trembles before his expository version of "Off to See the Wizard." This empathic connection made with the audience is over gender: the Lion wants to lose his weakness and be a "[real, male] lion, not a [sissy, effeminate] mou-ess." After furiously failing to meet his own and others' demands to be a man or butch it up or, at the very least, *fake it*, the Cowardly Lion is made aware of both the significance and constructedness of masculinity itself by taking the journey to Oz.

There is no way to know what might be the exact effects of this representation of feminized sissiness on a small child watching the film in the family home, be it shame, curiosity, giddiness, but one could speculate that the ways the film constructs the Lion as a viewed object might match the child's spatial relationships to fellow spectating family members. This duality (child viewed/child viewing) produces a kind of fragmentation of



Tinman, the Scarecrow, and Dorothy comfort the Cowardly Lion.

subjectivity for the child corresponding to the character's desire for wholeness.

CBS Television began its ritual broadcasts of the film in 1956, in an era when families were first purchasing televisions on which the film's sudden, radical shift to color could be appreciated. Before video allowed home screenings on demand, these broadcasts were annual, well-publicized events celebrating the family, the film, and the medium. If a child were watching the film in his living room, with his family present, then this spectating child's field of vision would include not only the image on the television but any family members sitting nearby. Any gender dictums of the culture (*Don't flit your wrists*) would be affirmed by the film, and this double field of vision for the spectating child would help enforce the prerogatives of the family and its relations.

I believe that this set of operations may duplicate two significant moments in the child's life. First, it reenacts the split in the mirror stage between mother and other when the child recognizes that it can be seen as an object by the mother's gaze in the mirror; and second, it may mirror the very moment of first-spectatorship. The childhood trauma of responding to certain stimuli which are designed to produce both a visible self and one marked as properly gendered (including a child's recognition of him/self as an object at the end of the film and his gender identification with the Lion) may first enter memory through shock defense, stored away and triggered involuntarily by a repeat viewing of *The Wizard of Oz*. That is, the child viewing the film may also at that moment be viewed by family members; the adult viewing the film may indulge in the collective spirit of the revival house, sharing memories

of first viewings. The film's performances would then negotiate these multiple identifications and operations for both the questioning child and any adult carrying the memory of childhood shame.

*Oh it's sad, believe me, missy,
When you're born to be a sissy
Without the vim and voive*

When I recently viewed the film with family members, my five-year-old and two-year-old nephews sat rapt in front of the television screen. Midway through the film, the four travelers reach the Emerald City and are treated to an extravagant spa excursion: restuffing, re-buffing, what seems to be a color consultation for Dorothy, and a full-on beauty-parlor makeover for the Lion. In the next scene, while waiting for the Wizard, Lahr's Lion launches into the comic centerpiece of the film, the narratively gratuitous, delightful song, "f I Were King of the Forest." Visually, the Lion now features, in his words, "a new permanent just for the occasion" and, prominently, a big red ribbon in his coif. My five-year-old nephew announced to the family, with some discomfort, "It's a *girl* lion." When asked how he knew, Ben said, "Because of the red ribbon in his hair."

Psychoanalytic semiotics and common sense assure us that images both mean and resist meaning. What kinds of gender instability, to this or any child, are being signified through this or any film? Through what lens may we interpret this or any representation? Film historians such as Parker Tyler, Vito Russo, and Boze Hadleigh have written comprehensive historical analyses of representations of gays and lesbians in mainstream Hollywood films with divergent inflections. However, all operate relative to representation politics: how one is seen defines in many ways who one is.³ That is, any given society's "ordering of reality" is dependent on the representations produced within that society. Taking a socio-historical stance, representation politics in the post-Stonewall era took on these stereotypes in the media, acknowledging that "typification is a near-necessity for the representation of gayness, the product of social, political, practical and textual determinations."⁴ In their own ways, these writers and the gay rights movement they engage, produce, and critique are deeply invested in confronting negative stereotypes and equalizing the playing field of cultural representation. Certain questions will always remain: Are only positive representations desired? Are

negative representations better than invisibility? How do spectators negotiate representation?

Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* is recognized as the definitive post-gay-liberation survey of homosexuality in the movies—starting with early silent shorts like Edison's experimental reel showing two of his male employees dancing; into the pre-Code 20s and 30s in which sissies were positive and likable, if nonsexual, comic figures; through the invisible years in which homosexual desire was buried under yards of heteronormativity; moving through pre-Stonewall-era films in which gays and lesbians were most often homicidal, suicidal, or both. His book, while using a studio PR shot of Lahr's Cowardly Lion as its frontispiece, never again mentions this prototypical Hollywood sissy, nor does it investigate the ideological and psychological effects of this representation on the family members who make up the film's intended audience. Rappaport, Tyler, Russo, and Hadleigh use wittily detached, emotionally recuperated, post-closet narrative voices to describe sissies; these rhetorically shrewd moves end up downplaying how the images themselves may have affected the construction as well as the supposed demolition of that closet for spectating children and adults. *The Celluloid Closet's* powerful voice, for example, assumes that the negative connotation of the mincing-Lion publicity still speaks for itself and for the kind of dangerous stereotyping which visibility politics would ideally eradicate. But in making this significant point through the use of a damning studio still photo, Russo's book elides the ways in which the performance itself may negotiate with the representation over time, and with audiences of various ages and degrees of association with both the film and the closet. I find, alongside the shameful representation of the Cowardly Lion, a set of oppositional meanings also generated by Bert Lahr. This performative excess of sissiness produces a kind of discursive agency for alternative or queer readings.

Lahr came up through the vaudeville circuit, performing from the age of 15 and honing his comic personae and his "gnong gnong" into a profitable career. As much entrepreneurs of comedy as artists, the best vaudevillians learned how to negotiate racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes to get laughs and temper audience affections while surviving a brutal touring circuit.⁵ Lahr in his day created several female characters (including Queen Victoria and a blushing mustachioed bride), and feminized masculinity surfaced regularly: one of his earliest vaudeville sketches is a flirtation scenario whose trick ending has Lahr exiting arm-in-

arm with another man, while a 1933 target was matinee idol and sissy archetype Clifton Webb.

For children watching *The Wizard of Oz*, and for the young at heart, the Lion as introduced is too butch to be true, a growling, fearless, action-oriented (“Who wants to fight me?”) roughneck. Although exposed immediately as a sissy, the tough-guy performance is always just under the surface (“Ain’t it da trut’, ain’t it da trut’”); indeed, the Lion’s struggle in the film is to manage the sissy so the real man will prevail as the authentic. We first see this authentic male self in the Kansas reality section of the movie, in which Zeke declares he’ll dog-bite Elvira Gulch, then saves Dorothy from falling into the pig trough. The other farmhands catch him being scared: “You’re as scared as she is!” they tease. Their point here is not that he isn’t a man (since he *did* rescue Dorothy), but that his body was caught expressing (womanly) fear. He is caught acting scared by the real men who may also feel this way but wouldn’t dare show it. This fear that he may not be man enough to protect Dorothy, and may be caught displaying this fear, produces his character in Oz.

As my nephew determined, gender is performance, and for the Lion, the stakes of the performance are played out between the body expressed as real-man (fists clenched) and the body expressed as sissy (limp wrist). Not only is the Lion’s gender expression regulated by the eyes of his friends, but he is also frequently caught in the gaze of a Wicked Witch who sees all in her magic lens. For the Lion, gender regulations are carried out through the spatial and discursive functions of Foucault’s panopticon. The Lion cannot help but show everything: the sissy is always under the surface ready to be exposed, with emotional extremities that force the femininity out into the light, displayed to excess. The performance of the Lion’s gender as a regulated fiction is in fact part of the delight taken by spectators, and Lahr’s struggle to pass as masculine is at the very heart of the comedy. A further performative operation occurs for the Lion (and the Scarecrow, Tinman, and little girl) in which, according to post-structural theory, the interiority of the self is constructed in language. There is both an external and an internal system, constructed discursively, in which sex functions to maintain the illusion of the stable, gendered self. As Judith Butler points out, “‘sex’ becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access.”⁶ For the purposes of this discussion, we might call this pre-linguistic site, both literally and metaphorically, home.

*Then I’m sure to get a heart,
— a brain, — a home, — the noive!*

“Home”—for Dorothy, for the child viewing the film for the first time, and for the subject viewing the film in the Castro Theatre—is a term open to negotiation, especially for a viewer whose desire is to somehow conflate these fictional and real temporal sites in order to secure meaning for the term. For example, a Lacanian reflection on this home would remind us that the memories of first viewings, dreams of a liberated future home, as well as the film itself, all of which one might wish to situate in the realm of the imaginary, are actually symbolic constructions of language. For the politicized spectator in the Castro, this home swirls around the term “closet” and includes the promises of coming out. This particular home/closet conflation variously and arbitrarily denotes the psychoanalytic conditions and social space from which one comes out, or is reborn—be it the restricting homophobic kinship environs of the child’s household, the public sphere in which arrest or battering might accompany any non-heterosexual act, or an internalized closet of shame. The material space after coming out, the where-you’ll-find-me of the self-outed person, is by definition an undefined space, a potentially unlimited horizon. Freud’s *heimlich* (which is familiar and congenial, which belongs to the house as well as what is concealed from sight) eventually coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*, whose repression-compulsion effect is later experienced as the uncanny, “often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality.” That a child may experience the film as being as real as life, and a fictional Oz as “realer” than Kansas, complicates Freud’s conclusion that the uncanny loses its power in fiction “as soon as it is given an arbitrary and unrealistic setting.”⁷ And using a gender performativity model, the material home in which a child viewer lives may be one which, according to Judith Butler, operates under “certain gender norms which originate within the family and are enforced through certain familial modes of punishment and reward,” and can be understood through certain theatrical discourses: “The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene.”⁸

And, presumably, after one has left the scene. If, for Butler, home is the site where the fiction of gender becomes real-ized, for Salman Rushdie, Kansas is fiction, and nothing is realer than Oz, than the dreams of

a better future and the homes we construct after an anarchic break with both the past and the desire for a lost home. For Rushdie, the film expresses "the human dream of *leaving*," a hymn to elsewhere, of making a new life where there isn't any trouble. We are all migrants with the exile's desire for home; thus the film's concluding faith in the Kansas home (the "countervailing dream of roots") represents a discursive wrong turn.⁹ Rushdie shares Butler's mistrust of placing faith in the fictions of the past. Given such overlapping discourses, this home would be a site compelling a revisit as an adult, in order to rearticulate within the field of the pre-linguistic performance. This compulsion to revisit the home in which gender-as-performance-style is constructed involves not just a sentimental trip down the Yellow Brick Road, but an attempt to disrupt the script into which one was born and to rearticulate the very terms of gender performance. But where? The site of this performance is impossibly located, impossibly defined, impossibly desired: there is, literally, *no* place like "home."

I believe that the film enacts an ontological struggle of terrifying force—a force which has the power to affect a child whose sense of himself, and himself in the world, is itself being formed. Child spectators, as well as the characters, search restlessly for their heart's desire, hoping to reconcile a yearning for a stabilized sense of self with a similar lack in the body. This search is marked by ongoing surveillance and the regulation of bodies by external forces; these bodies are constantly threatened, disappeared, sometimes even torn apart and reconstructed, as are many *real* homes. At the end of the film, once again, the spectator/character's sense of a unified self is simultaneously demolished and reassured: the Wizard, shown to be a sham, rewards the travelers with their medals and certificates, recuperating his and our identities by explaining that reality is a construction in language. The constructed reality of the film soon ends, and the child-spectator is left pondering just what it was about Oz which still matters, now that we are all back "home."

I wonder about myself as a kid, about this young gay boy, this "I," returned home at the end of the film; this "I" who has identified with the sissiness of the Lion, the desire not to be exposed as that sissy, the longing to be like the Scarecrow, and the very real fear of being torn apart by powerful, regulatory forces outside my home. I wonder what he/"I" made of the Wizard's final message to the Lion: "You are a victim of disorganized thinking," he begins. "You are confusing courage with wisdom. . . . For meritorious conduct, ex-

traordinary valor, conspicuous bravery against wicked witches, I award you the triple cross." *Listen kid: Organize your thoughts. Don't confuse courage* (if you feel like it, just let your wrists go limp) *with wisdom* (nobody likes a sissy). *These things are worthy of a medal: meritorious conduct* (be a good boy), *extraordinary valor* (fight with your fists), *conspicuous bravery against wicked witches* (the best kind of bravery is the conspicuous kind).

Imagining the film's ending as I may have experienced it at five years old, I wonder about identification, and narrative reward. I imagine I identified, positively and negatively, with a Lion strong enough to get a laugh but unable to control the feminine gesture. And if the Lion was my troubled reality, the Scarecrow was certainly a gentle ideal; the Scarecrow is at most times all-over limp, yet in the end masculine (straight) enough to win Dorothy's heart. Unencumbered by excessive emotion like the Lion or a preoccupation with emotion like the Tinman, accepting without self-criticism that physical gawkiness is a part of life, the Scarecrow is brave and true to Dorothy, and trusts the power of the rational, all of which are, of course, qualities linked to the masculine. The Scarecrow is antidote to the Lion, one who can will himself to bravery through intellect and is rewarded, in the end, by the longest goodbye, the last farewell, the greatest display of emotion from Dorothy (as a girl, the appropriate bearer of emotion). In spite of the Lion's momentary bravery in melting the Witch, little boys are ultimately encouraged by the text to identify with the masculine (heterosexual) Scarecrow over the feminine (autosexual) Lion, and are rewarded by the narrative for this identification.¹⁰ In this childhood battle between masculine and feminine embodiments, gestures, and inflections, which side wins?

*And the sparrows would take wing
fI, fI, were king . . .*

Twenty-five years after this imagined first screening, I attended *The Wizard of Oz* at San Francisco's Castro Theatre. Seeing this movie at the Castro promised, ensured, a specific kind of crowd response. An 1,800-seat Art Deco movie palace located in the heart of the gay district, the Castro is known for campy revivals of Hollywood classics—raucous events featuring the spectacle of gay-identified viewers unafraid to respond viscerally. Screenings there produce a kind of

queer appropriation of classic film texts (here I use the term "queer" to mark "a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non-/anti-/contra-straight cultural production and reception.")¹¹ What I expected was a certain kind of expression: camp comedy, diva worship of Judy!, and, yes, I wanted to see if others remembered the film as I did, to test what my memory was.

This flexible space for expression took all the forms I imagined, from the liberation-cheers over Dorothy's "We're not in Kansas anymore" to the howls of laughter when Glinda the Good announces that "Only bad witches are ugly" to the seven-minute pageant of extravagant inverted heteronormativity that was the Munchkins to the subversive sexual in-jokes like the Scarecrow's unknowing "It's very tedious being stuck up here with a pole up your . . . back." But with the entrance of the Lion and the mention of the word sissy, I felt something else going on. I wondered how many others, like me, didn't realize as a child just how, well, *queeny* the Cowardly Lion was. I soon found out. Every mince, every wail, every operatic excess was greeted with roars of approval. Unlike my memory of the film as a child, the Lion's efforts to butch it up seemed gloriously futile, just as mine must have been growing up. The sissiness was produced with such comic zeal and bodily excess, and his attempts to feign masculinity failed so spectacularly, that lines like "My robe will be satin, not cotton, not chintz" played with the triumphant force of one who refuses to be limited by something as piddly as gender difference. Lahr even rearticulated the Lion's own limp-wrist gesture when getting his hair done in the Oz Salon, but this time he seemed to be triumphantly flouting the very conventions which held him back.

If the film text produced the sissy, the flexible space of expression of the Castro Theatre took the representation of sissy and, working in cahoots with Lahr's excess, butched it up, creating the Sissy Warrior, feminine gestures in place, trumpeting the celebratory constructedness of all identity and a refusal to behave by the ideological operations of gender. We were also shifting from a narrative- and apparatus-produced identification with the Scarecrow to the Lion, as a kind of corrective to the shame produced by the text, if not always the performance. The fact that Lahr-as-Lion himself could not be aware of this re-signification mirrors the lack of future awareness of the child; that this reading would be available only upon a repeat viewing in adulthood helps the viewer manage a lost childhood of closetedness, fear, and desire for expression. Be-

cause Lahr generously created a vaudevillian's across-the-footlights unspoken dialectic with the audience, the representation emerged anew with multiple performative properties. As a queer rearticulation of an ideologically suspect classic Hollywood text, the performance and the screening could serve as an attempted recuperation of personal memory.

What puts the "ape" in apricots?

For a child, the end of a film, any film, may be experienced as a kind of primary loss, a castration, a simulation of the original loss of the object (mother). Seeing a film again would be an attempt to recuperate the lost experience of the original viewing as well as the lost object of the mother. The return to this site promises not only coherence of what Kaja Silverman refers to as the "divisions and losses" which occur on the way to a child's emergence as a coherent cultural subject, it also promises a return to the *jouissance* and plenitude experienced before the child entered the symbolic in language.¹²

What desires compel these repeat viewings? Are these desires fulfilled? By whom? I have imagined a specific scene in which a *memoire involuntaire* is triggered through a tissue of subjective relationships to the senses; the scene is the one described above, in which a small child is watching *The Wizard of Oz* in the company of the family. In this scenario the child's identifications are conflated and fraught: aspects of identification with the object on the screen (the body of the Lion), are indiscernible from the object viewing the screen (the child) and being viewed (by family members).

A promised return to a (real or imagined) site of childhood longing is obviously part of the film's boundless charm. By any measure, *The Wizard of Oz* has produced among the most loyal and deep of empathic responses from cinematic spectators. The film's performances produce a delightful range of character indeterminacies as well as genre instabilities (is *The Wizard of Oz* more a lavish MGM musical? vaudeville-era comedy? reality-based horror film?). In moments when the narrative drive is suspended (the musical numbers, the clown routines, the horror sequences), the performers can be said to adopt certain genre characteristics: the Scarecrow is the male clown whose antics spectators enjoy but do not mimic, and Dorothy is the innocent victim whose melodramatic

tears rendered in her desire to “go home” may be matched by a spectator. While a clown doesn’t produce mimetic body functions in spectators, a female melodramatic heroine may.¹³

But what about this Lion, who at times seems to be the masculine clown, available for detached laughter (“hippopotamus? I’d rip ’em from top to bottomous”), and at times exactly matches the excessive terrified response to the witch that a spectating child might (shaking, clutching at herself). This genre indeterminacy is also gender indeterminacy: Is the Lion a male clown or what Carol Clover has called a female horror-film “final girl”? In the film text, the Lion’s masculinity is recuperated at the end by the Wizard, and by his own acknowledgement that the female excess was mostly just in his head. But to a young child questioning gender performance who both mimics the Lion’s female excess and wishes to help save Dorothy from the Witch (as the Scarecrow pressures the Lion to do), the distinction between essential nature of gender and performance of gender may be an elusive one. The Lion would like to believe masculinity is just an act in his head. But it doesn’t exactly work—after all, it is not the Lion but the Scarecrow, in the end, whom Dorothy will “miss most of all.”

For the child, sexual difference is momentarily played out through a troubled identification with the object Cowardly Lion, and at the end of the film the child is thrown back on himself, but in direct opposition to the firm grasp rendered by severance. In other words, if the child experiences the body of the Lion as part of himself, and sexual difference is troubled at the end of the film, the child will be left with a *less* steady grasp on his own boundaries. It is this yearning I imagine propelling me back to the theater as an adult. It is this sense of fulfillment, of completeness, of recuperation, community, and peace that I remember washing over me in the theater. It is the lack of the object at the end of the film, it is this loss, which compels yet another repeat viewing . . . and this critique.

My nephew’s disdainful comment, “It’s a girl lion,” came as Lahr performed the fantasy-fulfillment “’f I were King of the Forest.” If the impossibility of clear gender alignment put the small child in an unstable position, it played with celebratory fervor for the group of spectators at the Castro Theatre. This number produces a remarkable variety of excess: excess of narrative indeterminacy (the Lion’s fantasy is that, as a king with “certain air of savoir-faire,” he will possess both absolute male authority as well as absolute feminine refinement); gender instability (he claims he

wants to be the King, but is acting like the Queen); as well as physical (in facial expressions and strutting) and vocal excess (in operatic trilling and mocking vocal inflections of both masculinity and dandyism). If the child watching the film laughed at or squirmed over the indeterminacies and excesses of the Lion in this number, the queens in the Castro Theatre celebrated the excess, shifting signification from embarrassment over the Lion’s sissy-subjectivity to triumph of oppositional excess as the categories of sissy and sissy warrior were repeatedly, gloriously produced and unfixed. As the Sissy Warrior *this* Lion signified, not only would “each rabbit show their respect to me; the chipmunks genuflect to me,” but “I’d show composure to every underling . . . ’f I, ’f I, were King.”

Indulging in the fantasy of overturning the hegemonic ideology of heteronormativity, spectators at the Castro were encouraged to make a collective repositioning of the Lion, once signified by the text as “Cowardly.” At the Castro, the Lion’s gender alignment seemed not only an impossibility, it played like a futility, a huge joke, and a waste of time. Flying outside the regulatory radar screen of the text’s sissy stereotype, Lahr’s performance worked discursively to allow multiple and resistant readings; much of the giddy joy of the screening came from this willful misreading which refused the correctives of the film. The very real pressures to align oneself along visually determined gender lines remain nothing to laugh at; but there is therapeutic value in the recuperation of shame, and, possibly, political value in rearticulating representations of gender normativity whenever possible.

As an imitation of life, the Lion fails both as a Platonic ideal (as he is a contradictory, though charming, figure, possessing two things in himself—masculine wiles and feminine hysteria) and an Aristotelian character (as he is full of inconsistencies, relying on spectacle rather than incident). This makes him an ideal postmodern as well as queer subject. The Lion possesses many of the hysterical physical attributes ascribed to the feminine, but never loses his femininity or his excesses as the story unfolds—in fact, in a queer reading, it is the triumph of the feminine which operates to disrupt the negative mimetic properties of the production’s shaming representation. But the Lion’s desire lines up, I think, with a childhood desire for coherence, unity, and tradition of gender, and while certain unities are unraveled (e.g., masculinity), the desire for clear gender alignment is never fulfilled. This lack of clear gender alignment in a childhood reading produces the desire to

return to the site post-closet. The fulfillment of this desire would depend on achieving a state of consciousness which identity politics would ideally provide (i.e., coming out as a gay man); however, it is a subject position whose perception of stability post-structuralists would be keen to warn against.

Spectators at the Castro renegotiate the text's meanings, and seemingly become the final authors of the film. However, this free-ranging reclassification of the authorless text may itself be a kind of false consciousness, a false sense of a politicized, recuperated present masking an even more powerful operative force. The audience's waves of approval were also fraught: What were we all doing by inverting this representation's shaming mechanisms? After all, if the child/Lion can't recognize the operations of the panopticon, an organization which doesn't require an author to administer power, could we at the Castro be fully aware of the ideological fields of representation in which we so joyfully, so shamelessly, played?

Just as the machinery of the film (narrative drive, subjective identifications through apparatus) produces a sissy in the Lion, an alternative in the Scarecrow, and a set of "proper" responses to the gender instabilities for children watching the film, so does the machinery of the queerly read Castro screening produce another, equally proper, alternative to the sissy: the Lion as Sissy Warrior—talented enough to simultaneously mince and save the day—and woe to the spectator, straight or gay, who misses this re-reading. The film's regulatory phenomena which were turned against it in a triumphant way were the very same regulatory phenomena which produced the queer spectators in the Castro, variously gay or not. The Castro reading was authoritatively queer, and the ideal spectator queer, be he gay or not. The audience might therefore have included members who were both included (being gay) and excluded (not getting the inside jokes, or sensing an incomplete recuperation of childhood shame compared to others in the audience). In other words, the proper Castro reading, while celebratory, could also produce a gay subject more outside the queer reading experience than his straight, but with-it, fellow spectator.

What an adult spectator brought to the Castro Theatre may have been more than the conscious desire to reconfigure the film in spectacular, queer terms; this public event may have masked a more private, though collective, compulsion. The urge toward a group rearticulation of the film (we all, straight and gay alike, rearticulated the film in celebratory, queer

terms) would hide another, less conscious need, another kind of impossibly desired, forever unfulfilled recuperation.

Home.

Ain't it da trut', ain't it da trut'

As adults—as irony-savvy, postmodern-reading adults—we crave genre indeterminacy, gender indeterminacy, any indeterminacy at all, feeling smart and sophisticated and adventurous enough to get the dry pop culture references and to engage with the disruptive narrative fissures of a film like *Pulp Fiction* as long as the film returns the viewer safely home, to the coffee shop, a bit shaken from the trip but smarter for having gotten the ride. Most films for children have their narrative structures securely in place, and, seemingly, so does *The Wizard of Oz* (it even has a built-in metaphor for narrative closure: getting home). But elements of the performances in *The Wizard of Oz* disrupt the safety of a causal narrative like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and these disruptive performances help produce the compulsion to return to the film, return to the site, and bind the narrative, somehow. A gay, straight, or questioning kid watching the film from that timeless place where gender is regulated daily in language (You throw the ball like a girl) watches all performances a little more closely (Is there anyone in the movie I can identify with, anyone doing it right, anyone not getting caught?). The closet by definition produces narrative panic: If kid homos end up pathetic, exposed, adult homos, how will my story end? The film's performances produce queer disjunctures, ruptures with classical narrative and viewer identification that a compelled re-viewing can attempt to manage. My re-viewing of *The Wizard of Oz* seemed a creation of performance space, a space of collective personal victory in the darkness of a movie theater, the recuperation of childhood self-surveillance through the appropriation of a classic Hollywood movie text and a rearticulation in spectators' bodies. To recognize the shock-of-recognition laughter of others as queer laughter was to own the darkness to which one had previously been abjected. To see *WOZ* at the Castro was to straddle memories of the closet and what felt like an uncomplicated, conscious awareness of a politicized present: it was a willful dance back into the closet—full of the darkest urges to be recognized and of dire prayers never to get caught.

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Notes

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1. The dovetail effect of Garland-as-gay-icon with Stonewall-as-birth-of-gay-liberation is described by historians and critics with a variety of inflections. In Annamarie Jagose's *Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), the death of Garland also represents a gay-liberationist abandonment of the homophile movement's tactics and cultural icons: "Stonewall functions in a symbolic register as a convenient if somewhat spurious marker of an important cultural shift away from assimilationist policies and quietist tactics, a significant if mythological date for the origin of the gay rights movement" (30). Neil Miller in *Out of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) sees the connection this way: "It was uncannily symbolic that the Friday the riots began was also the day of the funeral of the most beloved icon of the Boys in the Band gay culture that worshiped the tenacity of female entertainers like Garland but mirrored their helplessness as well" (367). Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) contains a comprehensive essay on Garland's appeal for gay men in which her role as cultural icon in the era leading up to Stonewall is everywhere implied but the riots are not mentioned.
2. Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 16.
3. Tyler's *Screening the Sexes* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973; New York: De Capo Press, 1993), Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987, 1981), and Hadleigh's *The Lavender Screen* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993) deploy personal voices reflective of the social politics of the decades preceding the publication of each: the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Tyler's proto-queer study uses a personal, florid, intellectually vigorous voice, eschewing the political (and teasing gay liberationist politics for being reductive) and celebrating forms of individual sexuality over socialized gender roles. Russo avoids Parker's camp associations with a methodically argued, thoroughly researched study whose aim, in part, is to legitimize not "homosexuality" but the critical study of representational politics itself.
4. Dyer, p. 19.
5. See John Lahr's *Notes on a Cowardly Lion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969, 2000). According to his son and biographer, Bert's "wild carnival spirit, instinct for anarchy, and his resilience" (68), trademarks of his comic personality, were tempered by his humanity: "Comedy is sympathy," Bert Lahr said (38).
6. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.
7. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Collected Papers, Volume IV*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 398, 406.
8. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 277.
9. Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 23.
10. The Lion's nascent feminized desire (which has no clear object) stands in opposition to the Scarecrow's nascent normalized desire (arguably fixed on Dorothy). Without a proper object of sexual desire (the Lion obviously likes Dorothy, but the Scarecrow seems to have a crush on her), the Lion is marked as an adolescent sissy boy, feminine, yet not asexual (since he is all about desire). I am here unsatisfied with the terms "homosexual" or "gay," suggesting as they do determinable sexual object choice, and I find the resistant nature of the term "queer" unable to properly connote the ways in which the film succeeds in neutering the Lion—in the film the Lion is both queerly other-ed and desexualized. I coin the term "autosexual" as a placeholder to help me write about a representation which is sexualized as well as disturbingly bereft of sexuality; for a spectating child, the Lion's desire is literally all dolled up with nowhere to go.
11. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 3. In his recent *Flaming Classics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Doty revisits the film, arguing that it is primarily and foremost a queer text and that it is straight or mainstream readings that are "appropriate."
12. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 8.
13. This argument follows Linda Williams' essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 5th Edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), in which she argues that the forms of bodily excess displayed in the "low" genres of pornography, horror, and female melodrama are spectacular displays of ecstasy, terror, and weeping, respectively. The display of the sensational body marks the films as belonging to non-classically-Hollywood film genres such as thrillers, musicals, and comedies, terms under which *The Wizard of Oz*, in moments, operates. But Williams also points out that in those genres, the display of bodily excess is not "deemed gratuitously excessive, probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown." However, in the case of the horror film, the female melodrama, and pornography, "the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (704).

