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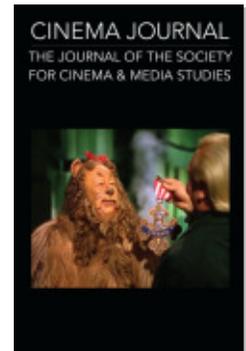
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The Sissy's Courage: In Memoriam Alexander Doty

by COREY K. CREEKMUR

It's simply impossible for me to evaluate the late Alexander Doty's contributions to queer film and television studies without—as they say—getting personal. I knew Alex for more than thirty years, from the time we met in graduate school at the University of Illinois until his untimely death, and so whatever sense I have of Alex as a scholar remains overwhelmed by my loss of a dear friend. Our friendship became a professional affiliation when we decided to coedit the volume *Out in Culture*, which we designed as one of the first anthologies devoted to, as our subtitle claimed, “gay, lesbian, and queer essays in popular culture.”¹

That collection was, at a basic level, generated by our attempt to bring together many of the stray essays we had located in very diverse sources and exchanged as photocopies. Our aim was to create a shared space for a rapidly growing body of what then seemed isolated criticism, although some of it was coming together around the recently rescued term *queer*. I was also privileged to witness the intellectual and creative process that resulted in Alex's two groundbreaking books, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* and *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*.² I'm especially proud to have casually suggested that Alex consider writing something about the comedian Jack Benny, whose popular yet effeminate persona struck me as curiously unremarked. Alex ran with the idea, and while I can't take any credit for the brilliance with which he pursued my remark, I'm still glad I nudged him. In any case, I just can't pretend to view Alex from the distance that might ensure a more neutral assessment of his important contributions to queer media criticism. Others can and will make those claims, and have already begun to do so, and I'm warmly reassured that they are confirming my own sense of Alex's originality and irreplaceability as a film and television scholar. It's been especially rewarding, if bittersweet, to hear from many of his former students how inspiring Alex was as a teacher and mentor. The mentorship program he helped launch through the Queer Caucus of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies is now

1 Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds., *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

2 Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

rightly named in his honor. I learned a great deal from Alex, too, but not, alas, in what must have been his incredibly invigorating and empowering classrooms.

However, if my friendship with Alex and now my mourning this still-unacceptable loss cannot allow me an impersonal perspective on his career, I'm keenly aware that the work defining that career in fact demands and authorizes my personal tone, or what Alex often emphasized as the critic's "investment." In addition to the emphatic argument driving much of his work—his insistence that queerness is located at the heart of rather than on the margins of popular culture—perhaps Alex's other important contributions to queer criticism were discursive and performative. Trained in rather conventional modes of academic writing and literary analysis, among his notable achievements was learning not just how to write insightfully about queer popular culture, or, more precisely, the queerness of popular culture, but also how to write (and lecture, and teach) queerly. His ambitious introduction to *Flaming Classics* begins with the blunt, "unprofessional" question "What's my investment?" and proceeds to interrogate the assumptions that position the very text we are reading: "Why shouldn't readers know something about a critic's personal and cultural background and training? Why is hiding or suppressing information like this still considered more professional and scholarly by most people?"³ Simply raising such questions, moreover, does not itself authorize narcissistic self-indulgence or excuse bold defiance of academic conventions: these methodological inquiries intertwine with personal details that the author admits he is "still not fully comfortable" with and that he worries may be "cringe-inducingly autobiographical in the context of a 'serious' film book." He recognizes that, perhaps given the relatively recent legitimation of film and media studies, "it's as if showing too much interest in what we are writing about somehow undermines our credibility as intellectuals."⁴ Once Alex came out as gay in his life and in print there was no turning back, but he acknowledged that self-doubt and fear of public embarrassment remained persistent risks in the kind of queer criticism Alex chose to advance and perform publicly for the rest of his career.

Still, Alex's approach to confronting these nagging concerns was remarkable. If he was going to—despite lingering hesitation—conduct his scholarship with his personal investments and enthusiasms out in the open, he was determined to balance this self-exposure with unimpeachable professional rigor. His "queer readings" always depended upon his locating convincing and mounting evidence of queer elements in (usually mainstream) texts, excavated through close analysis and abundant textual and contextual research in order to counter the anticipated charges that these were willfully imposed, self-interested acts of "reading into" innocent (implicitly straight) texts. Although Alex celebrated the gay camp tradition of "reading against the grain," he knew those seeking to protect beloved films and television shows from queer contamination could easily resist such claims. His persistent goal, so often stunningly achieved, was to make it impossible for anyone to be able to ever again view the objects of his analysis as they once had, following his readings. At the same time, despite their basis in deep research, Alex's essays insist that there's no reason to pretend they are disinterested or

3 Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 11.

4 *Ibid.*

objective scholarly exercises. Alex wrote about films and television programs and stars he loved, or those that annoyed him: the time and energy that research and writing required meant that the objects of analysis should matter, both to the unapologetically engaged critic and to his or her anticipated audience.⁵

While queer theory and activism obviously and directly emboldened and inspired Alex's criticism and teaching, I think his sense that scholarship must also be an engagement in cultural politics had important, earlier roots. Alex identified himself as gay and found the expansive category of "queer" tremendously liberating and productive, but even before he assumed those self-designations he was a committed feminist (who remained nonetheless wary of the presumption of men, gay or straight, claiming that status for themselves). Alex believed fervently in the 1970s women's movement mantra that "the personal is political," and it was very important for him that, once he determined that his own coming out as gay would direct his professional career, he remained in regular dialogue with the many feminist scholars who had influenced him as deeply as the inspirational first generation of openly gay film scholars (especially Robin Wood, Richard Dyer, and Thomas Waugh) whose work and examples he deeply admired. (Like Robin Wood, Alex's early work—his dissertation—included an ostensibly straight study of Alfred Hitchcock. For both, Hitchcock remained a career-long touchstone, notably allowing each to redefine his own queer approaches to cinema.) In his critical practice, it mattered to Alex that his innovative "lesbian" readings of female-centered sitcoms like *Laverne and Shirley* (ABC, 1976–1983) and *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985–1992), or of the otherwise gay camp classic *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), should demonstrate that "queerness" offered an interpretive range extending beyond the expected claims of a gay male critic. Perhaps most generously, Alex even allowed for the possibility of straight queers as long as heteronormativity was their critical target.

To summarize the rich intertwining of Alex's life and his work, or the inextricability of the personal and the political in his criticism, I want to emphasize a quality that encapsulates this skillful balance: Alex's courage. Again, for Alex, the ritual of coming out was necessarily social, cultural, and communal, extending far beyond the circle of his family, close friends, and employers. As a writer with the good fortune to be widely read, Alex came out to people he never met and never would meet. Again, this ostensibly personal decision established his professional persona: his queerness was performed in print, in public presentations, and perhaps most riskily in the classroom. Soon (one hopes), it may become difficult to re-create for many younger scholars how terrifying and daring this act was not so very long ago. That's of course a remarkable, welcome testament to progress that, however, should never lose sight of the dangers that coming out still entails. The transformation of Alex's earlier comfortably auteurist and historical work into an elaborated gay film and cultural criticism, and the development of an even broader queer media criticism, were developments that

5 For examples in addition to the texts already cited, see Alexander Doty, "Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo: The Sexy Hausfrau versus the Swedish Sphinx," in *Glamour in a Golden Age: Movie Stars of the 1930s*, ed. Adrienne L. McLean (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 108–128; Doty, "The Homosexual and the Single Girl," in *Mad Men, Mad World*, ed. Lauren M. E. Goodlad, Lilya Kaganovsky, and Robert A. Rushing (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 279–299.

he understood would include professional risks, uncomfortable self-exposure, awkward self-critique, and even self-celebration that might appear embarrassingly narcissistic. That took courage.

It's perhaps unsurprising that Alex loved (among a wide range of cinema not always reflected in his writing) *The Wizard of Oz*, which was of course already a key film in the history of pre-Stonewall gay male culture before Alex so dazzlingly explored it as a lesbian fantasy in an essay that seems to me among his most elegant and self-reflexive weavings of the personal and the political. In our introduction to *Out in Culture*, we had briefly used the film in a general and rather obvious example of what a gay or queer reading of a mainstream text might look like, but Alex's later return to the film was an ambitious attempt to reposition the film within queer culture through an essay that is part autobiography, part manifesto, and all stunningly original research and interpretation. Alex begins his essay (first published in the anthology *Hop on Pop*, and later included in *Flaming Classics*) with an intensely personal account of his childhood response to the film, which included his being deeply embarrassed by the sissy Cowardly Lion with whom he admits, as a sissy himself, he too fully, uncomfortably identified.⁶ As Alex says, long before *he* had come out, the Lion seemed "too out" until Alex's own much later acquisition of camp as a critical tool allowed him to "make peace" with the Lion and finally appreciate his "outrageous" drag-queen fabulousness. Rather quietly, to conclude this dramatic narrative of his own transition from loathing to loving the Cowardly Lion, Alex notes that he came to see how, through his over-the-top performance, the Lion "seemed to have a bravery the narrative insisted he lacked."⁷ I hope Alex would excuse my vulgar psychoanalysis, but I think that brief aside speaks volumes: it's not of course the narrative that insists the Lion lacks bravery—or what the Lion more often calls "courage"—but the Lion himself who declares this embarrassing lack. Alex tellingly doesn't use the word *courage* that the film repeatedly provides, for a reason I assume is touchingly obvious: while he let himself admit to his deeply uncomfortable identification with the Lion's sissiness, he couldn't bring himself to declare his own association with the Lion's courage. There's a wonderfully contrary moment in the 1995 documentary (directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman) based on Vito Russo's groundbreaking book *The Celluloid Closet* in which a series of clips of effeminate sissies from 1930s Hollywood movies is followed by contemporary commentators denouncing the pernicious stereotype, until actor and playwright Harvey Fierstein slyly admits he always liked the sissies.⁸ So did Alex, and it's this wise embrace of the sissy and his particular form of courage—the courage to openly be a sissy in an often oppressively macho culture—that seems to me as brave as any act I know. Courage and bravery are most often attached to popular images of hypermasculine figures, but is there anything braver than a gay man in a homophobic culture announcing to his family, friends, employers, professional colleagues,

6 Alexander Doty, "'My Beautiful Wickedness': *The Wizard of Oz* as Lesbian Fantasy," in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasure of Popular Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 138–158.

7 Doty, *Flaming Classics*, 50.

8 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (1981; New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

and—perhaps most risky of all—his students, that his own sissiness will not only be unrepressed but also indulged, displayed, and fully performed?

The Wizard of Oz's great trick—a scam, of course—toward the end of the film is to simply bestow superficial symbols for the possession of a brain, a heart, and courage upon Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion. We are meant to understand from key moments in the narrative that only they believe they lack these qualities, which they have in fact possessed all along. Alex does not otherwise discuss this major element of the story (except insofar as their particular rewards link to Dorothy's more complex desire for her lost "home"), and, again, despite admitting his early, ambivalent identification with the sissy Lion, Alex was not bold (or arrogant) enough to assert about himself what I want to emphatically affirm: like the figure who he first thought was a shameful role model but only later a figure in whom he could take pride (and what better figure for "gay pride" than a lion with a perm?), Alex *always* possessed great courage, even if he could not recognize this in himself or admit that this, too, could have been a source of his close identification with the (anything but) Cowardly Lion. (Alex of course had a brain and heart as well: I think he could have admitted to those, even if he demurred acknowledging his own bravery.) Alex was in fact and in deed that most compelling of seeming contradictions: a fierce, fearless sissy. His courage awed and continues to awe me, as I anticipate it will others who inherit and continue his brave queer legacy. *

Six Crises

by MATTHEW HAYS AND THOMAS WAUGH

What were we thinking of back in 2008 when the two of us pitched the series Queer Film Classics (QFC) to our beloved community-based Canadian publisher Arsenal Pulp Press? Did we really think a pop-and-pop enterprise known among much else for vegan recipe books and trans fiction—as well as queer collections by both Waugh and Hays and translated scholarly works on late Genet and homophobia—could compete with the British Film Institute's heterosexual film classics series (*Queen Christina*, *Wizard of Oz*, *Brief Encounter*, *The Servant*, *Victim*, *Fear Eats the Soul*, and *Far from Heaven*—out of seventy-eight titles, that's it?).¹ We saw our project as a salvage operation on our forgotten queer film heritage—including the "minor" Canadian one: transformative canon surgery, if you like, a kick in the archive. It was also a return to textual criticism, a refusal to fit that year's fashion for grandiloquent abstraction and wordplay.

1 Marcia Landy and Amy Villarejo, *Queen Christina* (1996); Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (2012); Richard Dyer, *Brief Encounter* (1993); Amy Sergeant, *The Servant* (2011); John Coldstream, *Victim* (2011); Laura Cottingham, *Fear Eats the Soul* (2005); and John Gill, *Far from Heaven* (2011)—all published in London by the British Film Institute Film Classics.