Widescreen Dreams
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Introduction

The wireless and the telephone have intervened. The letter writer has nothing now to build with except what is most private; and how monotonous after a page or two the intensity of the very private becomes! . . . Instead of letters posterity will have confessions, diaries, notebooks, like M. Gide's—hybrid books in which the writer talks in the dark to himself about himself for a generation yet to be born.

—Virginia Woolf, "The Humane Art"

It seems to me that not only is there loads to be gained from genuinely experimental approaches to critical writing, but that it's intellectually dishonest and deadening to take for granted what critical writing is . . . I'm . . . interested in how it would be possible to programatically refuse to exclude the personal, the realm of the autobiographical, or the first person, but at the same time pull those elements into new and unexpected relations to theory and to the writing process.

—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "A Talk with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick"

Widescreen Dreams: Growing Up Gay at the Movies is a hybrid book. A synthesis of autobiography and cultural criticism, it describes my emergence from childhood into gay male adulthood as a series of encounters with an odd handful of Hollywood movies—The Sound of Music (1965), Hello, Dolly! (1969), The Poseidon Adventure (1972), Dog Day Afternoon (1975), and The Wiz (1978). These movies were the high points of my growing up years, and they strongly influenced the way I thought about myself and the rest of the world. They also mark stages in time from the rise of gay liberation in the late sixties to its reconfiguration during the AIDS epidemic, which began in the early eighties. My own development as a gay man intersected with this gay American history in unpredictable ways, and my understanding of both myself and my place in history is, and has always been, determined in large measure by the movies.

In their distortive way, Hollywood movies reflected crucial aspects of my world when I was growing up, as they have done for so many people for as long as they have existed. The movies were filled with happy families, like my family; unhappy families, also like mine; underdogs and queer heroes, which, in a variety of ways, I understood myself to be; all-embracing mother-figures, like my mother, like my piano teacher; pleasure cruises, like the one my family took in the late sixties while visiting my grandparents in Florida; pretty buildings to look at and live in, like the big old Victorian house in suburban Chicago our friends the
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McDonalds lived in; people who expressed themselves through music, like me when I played the piano.

But in some ways, the movies ruined me. They let me down. They began and then they ended, and it was never enough. Before the widespread availability of VCRs, you had to cherish the memory of a favorite movie and keep that memory alive within yourself, and it wasn't easy because you would start forgetting things, or you'd start to embroider the memory, and then it would turn out that what you were busy remembering wasn't the truth. Whenever I would return to a film—either because it was shown on TV a few years after its initial theatrical release or because it was, for some reason, rereleased in theaters—it was always different from what I remembered having seen and loved, and often it wasn't as good as what I remembered. It seems I spent my life trying to reconstruct and recapture in my mind the things I'd seen and heard and loved in the movies: Julie Andrews's first appearance in the Austrian Alps at the beginning of The Sound of Music, singing, "the hills are alive!"; or the set of the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant in Hello, Dolly! and the way Barbra Streisand coolly descended the long, wide, red staircase at the climax of the film, to be received with open arms by her friends, the waiters and chefs and maitre d's, singing "you're looking swell, Dolly!" Or the way the ship in The Poseidon Adventure capsized at the stroke of midnight in the middle of the ocean on New Year's Eve, sending passengers and furniture flying helter-skelter, crash!, thud!, through the air; or Diana Ross and company's rousing performance of "A Brand New Day" at the climax of The Wiz, when Evillene the Wicked Witch has just been killed and her slaves are set free, and everybody is dancing and singing and peeling off their clothes for joy! Or the way the hero in Dog Day Afternoon, played by Al Pacino, talked to his male lover as if he really did love him, as if it were really possible to have someone like Al Pacino love you, and not just the way my parents always said they loved me but the way a man loves a woman—heart and soul, mind and body. These boundary-breaking scenes lasted only a precious few moments, but their impact was lifelong. And somehow, no matter how much I thought or fantasized about them—no matter how often I looked at movie stills, listened to soundtrack recordings, or tracked down books about the movies, movie stars, and moviemaking—there was no substitute for the real thing (I mean the actual film). And even the actual film was no substitute for real life, if only real life could ever be as wonderful as it was in the movies.

Which, of course, it never was. The title of Widescreen Dreams is taken from the lyrics to Rupert Holmes's "Widescreen," a song Barbra Streisand recorded for her Lazy Afternoon album (1975). The song bemoans how the movies, dark and dreamlike, seduce us into believing that life
can be fulfilling, then let us down as soon as we return to the light of
day. I see more clearly now than I ever did before that the movies don't
just provide harmless, pretend escape from the troubles of life. They
do active and often pernicious work in our culture. They tell us how to
feel, how to think, how to behave, they tell us what exists and what does
not, and none of it is to be trusted. In the liner notes to “Widescreen,”
Streisand writes: “As a fourteen-year-old, leaving a movie theatre on a sti­
fling summer afternoon, the hot, humid reality of Brooklyn often made
me long to return to the air-conditioned dream palace. At this point in
my life, however, I don’t want to go back into that dark place; I’d rather
deal with the heat and humidity of living.”

Yet I don’t feel there’s quite so severe a choice to be made between
“the air-conditioned movie palace” and “the stifling summer afternoon.”
Hollywood movies live inside me, and I live them out wherever I go (for
instance, every time I cross one of the avenues in New York, I look up
the avenue and watch the perspective gradually shift as I walk, as if I
were a camera); “real life” and life on the widescreen cannot be so easily
separated. For as much as the movies are made by us, they also make us
who we are. Now I don’t want to dismiss the movies just because they
lie or because I’ve “outgrown” them, for that would only be another
kind of escape—just like I wanted to escape my home and family when
I was a child by living “inside”: inside my head, inside the movies I
loved. Now I want to understand why I’ve cared so much about certain
movies, how they’ve made me who I am, what they reveal about Ameri­
can culture, and where I go—where all of us go—from here. Life consists
of one disappointment after another, Barbra Streisand wails in “Wide­
screen,” when your most meaningful life experiences happen at the
movies; “but,” she insists, “my movie expectations are a dream I can’t avoid.”

Widescreen Dreams contains five chapters, each focused principally on
one movie and the peculiar role it played in shaping my identity. In a
series of “outtakes” at the end of each chapter, I catalog my responses
to a selection of performers, movies, and TV programs from the late
fifties to the early nineties as a way of providing a larger cultural con­
text for the films under discussion in the main parts of the chapters. In
each chapter, I discuss a particular film in terms of my experiences—
or rather, of my memory of what I experienced—and in turn I describe
my experiences in relation to the film and the broader culture to which
it refers. In other words, I read the film metaphorically as if it were
telling my story, and I tell my story through the medium of popular
film. Each of the five main films I discuss marks a period and a place
in my development and in the development of American popular cul­
tured during what can loosely be called the Stonewall era, the era of gay liberation just prior to the onslaught of AIDS. Together, the chapters trace an uneven path of gradual—though never complete, never one-way—development from childhood through adolescence and on toward adulthood, from self-ignorance to self-knowledge, and from being "in the closet" to being "out." And this development occurs both on a private, personal level (my story, who I've been, how I've changed) and on a public, cultural level (the story of American popular culture during the sixties and seventies, what that culture looked like, what it tried to say, how it changed during those years).

Chapter 1, "The Happiest Family in All the World!", traces my love of film as well as my self-awareness as a gay person to my childhood obsession with *The Sound of Music* and the hours I spent listening to its original soundtrack while meditating on the accompanying liner notes and film stills. The chapter describes a trinity of female mentors, liberators, and role models—Maria von Trapp, as played and sung by Julie Andrews; my piano teacher, Mrs. Hasbrouck; and my mother—who helped me find my place in the world. And it reveals the interior structure of the large Catholic family, a version of which I glimpsed in *The Sound of Music*, whereby I came to identify myself simultaneously as part of the clan and as deviant from it.

Chapter 2, "Love Barbra," explores my attraction both as a child and as an adult to Barbra Streisand and in particular to one of her most notorious flops, *Hello, Dolly!* It describes the paradox that, on the one hand, certain kinds of gender nonconformity were not tolerated when I was growing up, while, on the other hand, my intense involvement with Barbra Streisand was for the most part openly acknowledged and accepted, at least within my family. By charting a series of conversations I've had over the years about Barbra Streisand with family and friends, especially gay male friends, I show how she became an occasion for solidarity and strife among us. I also explain how Barbra Streisand's music and films both validated and helped me cope with feelings of extreme powerlessness.

Chapter 3, "The Wreck of the Family," recalls the ambivalence I experienced growing up gay in a straight milieu; the thrill of imagining, through the medium of the disaster film *The Poseidon Adventure*, home and family torn to shreds; as well as the fear of abandonment and the sense of isolation that come with any revolutionary, catastrophic change. In addition, the chapter examines the possibilities for reading seventies disaster films, especially *The Poseidon Adventure*, as gay texts and, now, as AIDS allegories.

Chapter 4, "Like Home," explores my penchant ever since childhood
for creating utopias and alternative spaces, physical and psychological, tracing it to my early interest in architecture, unbuilt houses, and Victorian and modernist mansions. As a kid, my interest in architecture merged with my love of movies and movie architecture, and soon evolved into a devotion to New York City as the ultimate movie set come to life. The chapter culminates in a discussion of my adolescent fascination with The Wiz, a movie in which the kingdom of Oz becomes a fantasy vision of New York City and where Dorothy has now grown up to become a young woman in her twenties on the brink of an as-yet-undefined sexual self-transformation.

In Chapter 5, “Coming Out, with Al Pacino,” a study of my attraction as a fifteen-year-old to Pacino’s character in Dog Day Afternoon, I describe the structure of my fantasy life at the pivotal moment—roughly, puberty—when the real possibility of a gay identity and of a loving relationship with another man, glimpsed in the film’s portrayal of the hero’s relationship with his boyfriend, first entered and altered my mind. I examine the film’s attitude toward deviance and urban life, and I show how this influenced my self-image as a teenager. I also use my positive adolescent response to the film as a means to challenge more recent charges of it as being homophobic.

I focus on these particular five films not because they constitute some “canon,” popular or otherwise, of Hollywood films during this period (although some of them would, in fact, qualify in one way or another as representative) but rather because they happen to be the movies that meant the most to me as I was growing up and because, in writing about them, I’m trying to understand as fully as possible who I am and why I think and feel as I do. Someone else would cherish his or her own private pantheon of favorite movies (or books or musical compositions or whatever cultural objects mattered the most), and the selection would be, as it is here, partly accidental—accidental, but not meaningless.

One of the recurring themes of Widescreen Dreams is that “criticism,” whether academic or journalistic, published or spun out in casual conversation over the telephone or on the sidewalk in front of the theater after the movie has ended, is rooted in the particular—and usually concealed—prejudices of the individual critic. These prejudices may best be described not as hard-earned intellectual convictions (though they may be that) or timeless evaluative frameworks (I doubt such things exist) but rather as residuum of the critic’s life story. Widescreen Dreams, unlike conventional memoir and unlike conventional criticism, brings the life of the critic center stage in order to show how life experience becomes a crucial basis for critical insight, and in turn how critical thinking may illuminate life experience. This does not simply mean that critics’ re-
Responses to the culture around them are or should be reducible to their life stories (in other words, that "all criticism is always already autobiography"—which, however, I think it is), but that honest, self-aware criticism cannot be done without acknowledging and exploring within the act of criticism itself the strange, unpredictable ways that art and life wrap around each other. *Widescreen Dreams* is an extreme example of what all kinds of criticism could in some sense look like.

I've written much of the book as if from a child's perspective—that is, from the perspective of my childhood self—because I want to place "naive" styles of interpretation on a continuum with more critical ways of knowing. Children's misreadings of the world around them, the book implicitly argues, are not some entirely other species of discourse; we should think of them instead as "cartoon" versions of adult analysis and criticism ("cartoon": don't think of Mickey Mouse—think of Leonardo da Vinci's *Cartoon with St. Anne* at the National Gallery in London). The book further conceives of the child's point of view, again implicitly, as a metaphor for a gay point of view: children see themselves as the addressees of every cultural statement, the referent of all representation, because they don't fully realize that although they are part of a larger world, they aren't the center of it. Somewhat similarly, we as gay people find ourselves enmeshed in a culture that studiously ignores us or radically misrepresents us; thus, in order to compensate for what the culture withholds from us, we appropriate it (in fantasy, in subculture) and make it say what we need it to say.

But then there's almost no telling when and how some aspect of mainstream culture may be "queered"; the most unsuspecting aspects of the culture may turn out to have queer resonance. This habit of gay interpretation is what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, has called "camp-recognition": "[Camp-recognition] says what if: What if the right audience for this were exactly me? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or of some of the people, who created it? And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same "perverse" angle? Unlike kitch-attribution, the sensibility of camp-recognition always sees that it is dealing in reader relations and in projective fantasy (projective though not infrequently true) about the spaces and practices of cultural production" (156; emphasis in the original).

In Sedgwick's most recent work, this notion of gay interpretive practice becomes the basis for what she defines as a new and much-needed "reparative" approach to cultural criticism:
The desire of a reparative impulse . . . is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self. To view camp as, among other things, the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to be able to do better justice to many of the defining elements of classic camp performance: the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternate historiographies; the “over”-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture. (“Paranoid” 27–28)

The “presiding image” of such reparative criticism, Sedgwick suggests,
is the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (yet?) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. Such a child—if she reads at all—is reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may proffer an answer. The model of such reading is hardly the state of complacent adequacy that Jonathan Culler calls “literary competence,” but a much more speculative, superstitious, and methodologically adventurous state where recognitions, pleasures, and discoveries seep in only from the most stretched and ragged edges of one’s competence. (“Paranoid” 2–3; emphasis in the original)

Not unlike children, then, gay people find themselves in a position to produce particularly talented, imaginative “misreadings” of their cultural surroundings, and it’s the structure of misreading as it relates to the problem of identity that *Widescreen Dreams* seeks to explore. (Of course, in no way do I wish to reinforce those old, homophobic stereotypes of gay people as childlike or as mistakes incarnate, though I realize that my argument risks doing so.)

Finally, the book argues that every kind of individual identity, while it may get formed according to widely shared biological and social processes, ends up being “queer” in the broadest sense of that term. “People are different from each other,” Sedgwick declares to be the first axiom of gay and lesbian studies (“It’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative” [*Epistemology* 22; emphasis in the original]). Any understanding of human identity, gay or otherwise, must take into account the various and winding roads
by which we travel to arrive at the sense of an identity, and so it’s im-
portant that we tell our stories about how we think we came to be who
we are and that we look critically at those stories. *Widescreen Dreams* tells
how I arrived at my own sense of an identity. You may find elements of
your story in mine.
Widescreen Dreams