Widescreen Dreams
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I liked the old, overstuffed apartment where Gigi (played by Leslie Caron) lived with her grandmother, “Mamita” (Hermione Gingold). The walls were red and most of the furniture was red too. Mamita was always disappearing into the kitchen through a doorway in the back wall, serving tea and saying how happy she was to see Gaston (Louis Jourdan), a friend of the family and, later, Gigi’s suitor, whenever he would come to visit. The apartment was a wonderfully unpredictable mixture of informality and tradition. Gigi’s bedroom was just off to the left as you walked in the front door, which seemed a little precarious but exciting at the same time; bedrooms as I’d known them were always sequestered safely away from the front door, somewhere else in the house where visitors couldn’t see them. Adding to the sense that Gigi and her bedroom were “on the verge” of something, her bedroom door was more like a closet door than a regular door to a room, with horizontal slats (like the closet doors in my bedroom), as if you might be able to see through it into the bedroom. And there was a charmingly regal little flight of steps, not more than two or three, leading up to her bedroom door, as if it were on a pedestal (which seemed to contradict the informality of her bedroom door and its placement so near to the front door of the apartment). These steps made her look even more stunning than she already was when, late in the film, she descended them, a “lady” for the first time, no longer a girl, wearing a white dress with a high white neck, to go out with Gaston for the evening.

But even more than Mamita’s warm, inviting apartment, I loved the long, irregular staircase that led up to it. It had two landings and seemed to curve slightly as it rose. The railing was thin, not heavy, almost unsteady looking, but that enhanced the charm of the staircase. Like Mamita’s apartment, like Gigi herself, it was somewhat fragile and aged (for much of the film, Gigi, despite her youth, is too smart to fall in love as everyone else around her seems to be doing), yet springy with youthful optimism, wise yet head-over-heels in love. There was a head-over-heels quality to the staircase, perhaps because that’s how Gaston feels when, at the end of the film, having realized that Gigi is not just “that funny, awkward little girl I knew,” but, in fact, the woman he loves, he races like an impetuous boy of sixteen (though he looks to be a man of thirty at least) up the long staircase, burning with the revelation that he loves Gigi and that he is ready to marry her, not keep her as his mistress as he had intended before, and he bounds up the stairs, skipping two and three steps at a time, to tell Gigi and Mamita the joyous news.
The first time I saw *Grease*, I was horrified by the cynical ending in which Sandy, played by Olivia Newton-John, turns herself from a normal, pretty, polite girl into a black-leather-clad, cigarette-smoking, spiked-heeled vamp to win back Danny, played by John Travolta, who thought it was too uncool to go out with a square girl like Sandy. Of course I assumed that ultimately Danny would realize that good girls were better than bad girls and, anyway, it didn’t matter if Sandy was a little square on the outside because he loved her for who she really was on the inside (i.e., a good, decent girl who doesn’t drink, swear, or tease her hair). At the end-of-the-school-year carnival, Danny, who has been experimenting with a change of image himself (he’s wearing a respectable letter sweater), catches sight of Sandy, all done over in her “bad girl” look. They sing and dance together (“You’re the one that I want, oo oo oo, honey”), chase each other through a fun house, then get into a car that, magically, flies off into the clouds, and the movie ends.

I couldn’t believe that was the ending! I thought for sure, Danny would be so upset to see Sandy using her sex appeal in such a grotesque way to get his attention that he would say, “Okay, enough, let’s call a truce. You can go back to being the way you were, and I’ll ignore all the peer pressure and I’ll be good to you and you alone from now on.” But unfortunately it seemed that being disobedient and sexually promiscuous won out over following the rules and abstinence before marriage.

On the other hand, the way John Travolta peeled off his letter sweater and swiveled his hips when he saw that he didn’t need to dress like a good boy for Sandy any longer was an unbelievable turn on.

Somehow, I felt differently after seeing *Grease* a second time a couple of weeks later. For one thing, “You’re the One That I Want” was such an infectious number that it seemed a perfect way for the movie to end—upbeat, melodic, fun to sing and dance along with, and the more I watched John and Olivia in that last scene, both dressed in skin-tight black clothing (god, those tight black pants on John Travolta!), their look began to seem much better than the nerdy 1950s fashions that everyone else in the movie was wearing and which all the characters wore on the TV sitcom *Happy Days*. The ending of *Grease* seemed, in a way, to point towards the future, although I’m not sure I thought it was the future of the 1960s exactly (which is what the future would have been in terms of the time period represented in the movie), and not necessarily the 1970s either (which would have made sense given that the movie was made in the 1970s and succeeded in turning the gaze of the 1950s ever toward itself). The “future” that *Grease* looked forward to was not
a temporal future, but an attitudinal future, an emotional future. And a sexual future. Between my first and second viewings of *Grease*, I had learned, without realizing it, not to care if Sandy remained a “good girl.” I even came to like the off-balanced feeling the movie gave me in the end; I *liked* the idea of taking a bad turn and never coming back from it—of just driving off into the sunset and never looking back, of being bad and staying bad. That felt exciting and daring in the same way that John Travolta’s gyrating torso made me want to have sex with him so badly that I started dreaming up scenarios in which we were having an affair that got leaked to the press, and then everywhere we went we were hounded by reporters and gossip columnists and we never seemed to get a moment’s privacy. Even when he would pick me up in his private helicopter and fly me out to his secret mansion in California or Washington state (sometimes you just need to escape the big city), somehow the press always found out about it and wrote stories speculating about our relationship and insinuating that we might be gay.