

57. Minnelli, "The Show Must Go On," *Stage* (September 1936): 33–35, quote on 35.

58. Lambert, "Notes on Vincente Minnelli."

59. In the biography of his father, Bert Lahr is described in this scene as costumed with a papier-mâché ax while "posed preposterously next to a scrawny tree. . . . He wore a checkered hunter's shirt and a toupee matted on his head. He began raising both hands delicately toward his chest and then unleashing an outrageous sound." In the meantime, Bea Lillie anxiously awaited her cue when she could "throw boards, brooms, anything I could get my hands on" at the singing woodsman. John Lahr, *Notes on a Cowardly Lion* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 163–64.

The Production and Display of the Closet Making Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy*

DAVID A. GERSTNER

To make Robert Anderson's play *Tea and Sympathy* into a film,¹ MGM had to convince the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the Production Code Administration (PCA), and even the Catholic Legion of Decency that the film would clearly punish the sexual transgression of the married woman, and that it would not overtly or covertly make any reference to homosexuality. In effect, the centerpieces of the play had to be removed. No matter how MGM attempted to rewrite the narrative to satisfy the Code, *Tea and Sympathy* would either be the play it was on Broadway or it would be morally objectionable. In his memo summarizing the making of the film, Geoffrey Shurlock (Joseph Breen's successor as the director of the PCA) pointed out to MPAA president Eric Johnston that "Any proposed treatment removing these two unacceptable basic elements of the play would make it necessary to write an entirely new story and hence would seem to make pointless the purchase of the particular play."²

Tea and Sympathy had already caused quite a stir when it opened on Broadway in September, 1953. Aside from the publicity surrounding Deborah

Kerr's first New York stage performance, *Tea and Sympathy* shot right for the heterosexual male jugular. The play challenged not only the social doxology surrounding masculinity, but also, worse, it waved the threat of latent homosexuality in the very faces of those whose insecurity matched the hyper-masculine figures in the drama. As one reviewer put it after seeing the film: "It may make more than one adult male squirm in his seat with unhappy memories of youth."³ Situated within the context of 1950s America, *Tea and Sympathy* was risky business. Risky, but successful. Major studios and independents (MGM, Paramount, Warner, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Samuel Goldwyn) vied for its film rights.

According to letters and memos found in the Production Code's files for MGM, each studio's difficulty in making this film circulated around the utterance (implied or otherwise) of homosexuality. In fact, both points of Code contestation (homosexuality and the woman's sexual transgression) were imbricated with homophobia and fear of the effeminization of masculinity. Through a series of public and private discourses (which are founded upon and within a historical relationship of urban male middle-class anxiety about gender and political effeminization), the making of *Tea and Sympathy* at MGM points to what critical theorist Eve Sedgwick terms the *spectacle of the closet, homosexual closet*. Not only is the film a marker of the spectacle of the closet, but the spectacle of the closet is generated, displayed, and reinforced precisely through the discourses of the making of the text and, more precisely, through the making of the film's structured silence.

Caught in the confines of 1950s production regulations, Vincente Minnelli was put on the job to make a film that abided by these constraints. Yet his aestheticization of the text—his color-coding of the text—effectively works within and against the enforced proscriptions of the PCA and the Legion of Decency. Minnelli's use of an aestheticized *mise-en-scène* makes it possible to realize the anxiety-ridden intersections that exist between the discursive practices surrounding the making of the film (what to do about the homosexual and the transgressive woman) and the social conditions in which those discursive practices were situated (in what ways do the homosexual and the transgressive women threaten American masculinity?). *Tea and Sympathy* marked the site of contestation not only in the multiple changes Hollywood faced in the 1950s but also in the wrenching changes in political gender relations in America, in which both the MGM producers and Minnelli participated.

Tea and Sympathy tells the story of Tom, a young boy at Chilton Prep School in New England. He lives in the home of the school coach, Bill Reynolds, and

his wife, Laura. Laura's role is well established by her marriage to Bill—her emotional involvement with the boys is limited to serving them "tea and sympathy." All the other boys who live with them are involved in school athletics, reflecting what Bill considers a family tradition at Chilton, especially in his household. The young scions that dwell there are, on the one hand, young robust men—the regular guys. Tom, on the other hand, prefers Bach and folk songs to volleyball and football. In both the play and the film, Tom is the threatening agent of Bill's masculinity. He is not just a young boy who becomes infatuated with Bill's wife but also a male figure who threatens Bill's image of masculinity. The play and the film, however, rehearse two different versions of what this threat implies.

In the play, Tom, because of his "long-haired" proclivities, is accused of being "queer." His homosexuality is confirmed when he is reportedly seen nude on the beach with a "known" homosexual teacher from the school. In the film, he is caught by two of the school's volleyball players in a sewing circle on the beach with the faculty wives. His being caught in a "feminine" activity gains him the nickname Sister Boy, and he becomes the target of rumor and blacklisting. In fact, he is considered so far outside the parameters of the regular guys that, during the bonfire rites-of-passage scene, when the other young initiates are humiliated by having their pajamas torn off, Tom is ignored, and is thus humiliated because he is not *properly* humiliated.

Both the play and the film are about the developing relationship between Laura and Tom, which leads to a sexual liaison. In Laura he finds the one person who empathizes with him. She marks the tripartite space of mother, confidante, and lover for Tom. The oft-quoted final line ("Years from now . . . when you talk about this . . . and you will . . . be kind") will, however, carry two different conclusions. The play's ending on this note does not necessarily recommend an absolute or final (heterosexual) desire. Rather, the play potentially lends itself to the idea of choosing one's own sexual object (i.e., Tom may be with Laura at this point, but we are given no indication of what his future choices might be).⁴ The film, however, through the addition of a prologue and epilogue (the framing story), will in fact turn out to be a *fait accompli* of heterosexual standards and regulations.

The prologue sets the body of the narrative in a flashback. Tom has returned to Chilton for a ten-year reunion, and he recalls meeting Laura and the events that followed. The epilogue immediately follows the famous final scene by introducing a letter from Laura to Tom in which she tells him that what they did was wrong and that she has realized the error of their ways. She must leave Chilton for some undisclosed place where she will never be seen or heard

from again. In effect, Laura defends the production of the closet by letting Tom know that his quest and struggle for manhood, while inappropriate in the way they handled it, is good as long as he ends up married and is able to repent for the wrong they committed. Tom gets away with marriage and Laura serves time in the eternal void.

While Vito Russo is right that the “visibility [of gays] has never really been an issue in the movie,” he omits the historical discourse of production of the very closet he discusses in his book. His suggestion that the film version of *Tea and Sympathy* “mutes” the homosexual text of the play is useful, however, in terms of a historical analysis.⁵ Russo’s contention that, “at no time was consideration given to making the homosexuality in *Tea and Sympathy* more explicit,”⁶ elides the underpinnings of a discourse of production that actually *did* consider the possibility of including the homosexual in the film. Homosexuality is “muted” in the film insofar as that “muting” is produced through a hyperbolic cacophony of silencing that homosexuality.

The making of *Tea and Sympathy* is precisely one of the places where the Hollywood institution reveals itself making the closet. Eve Sedgwick sees the “spectacle of the homosexual closet” as the “open secret.” “Closetedness [is] itself,” she suggests, “a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.”⁷

It is in the making of the film that the reinforcement of the “normative,” or compulsory heterosexuality, is maintained. The normative supports and sees itself through its own mythic binarisms (male/female, sex/violence, normative/nonnormative, homosocial/ homosexual). This is to say that particular relationships are sanctioned within the normative. Outside the heterosexual marriage contract there lie relationships between men and between women—the homosocial—that purportedly do not participate in sexual relations. The homosocial works coterminously with the normative order’s binary structures to the extent that the normative guards the homosocial against both sexuality and violence. But it is the homosocial that guards the normative binaries by defending them against degrees of difference. Variation from the established order motivates suspicion on the part of these assigned guardians. The degree of difference is decidedly valuable to the well-being of the normative because the normative maintains its mythic binaries by exposing what is outside the social order. The degree of difference is located in the homosocial through the marked outsider.⁸

The play’s contextual relationship to McCarthyism is most obvious. The public postwar discourse (articulated through the speech act of smearing)

facilely determined personal character by appearance and gesture. It underscored the almost maniacal fear of loss of control on the side of the Law. *Tea and Sympathy* flagged the insidiousness and the ease with which these witch-hunt campaigns could proceed. Laura, at one point, reminds Tom’s roommate, Al (as well as the audience), “how easy it is to smear a person.”⁹

The entanglement of moral discourses of sexuality and gender relations in America came under great stress between 1920 and 1950. Middle-class values were moving toward a more liberal stance, but conservative organizations also sprang up in response to this liberal swing. In the 1950s, *Tea and Sympathy* found itself relegated to the list of literature condemned by the National Organization for Decent Literature (alongside *From Here to Eternity*, *The Well of Loneliness*, and *Catcher in the Rye*). During this time, the Legion of Decency already had a stranglehold on Hollywood film censorship. Focused on FDR’s New Deal and leftist policies, the Republicans denounced Communism in the late 1940s with accusations of “red” infiltration in government positions. But red is not the only color of anxiety.

John Boswell notes that, as early as AD 1215, markers of identification were utilized to locate “degrees of difference,” particularly those which could not necessarily be seen. One of the rulings of the Fourth Lateran Council “ordered [Jews] to wear clothing which [would distinguish] them from Christians.”¹⁰ Boswell goes on to say that where identification of difference in homogenous areas was difficult, the wearing of the “Jewish badge” was enforced. Centuries later, the Nazis would demand the placement of an identification “badge” (Jew, gypsy, criminal, homosexual, etc.) on concentration camp prisoners in order to determine the marked prisoner’s treatment and/or punishment.

It is precisely the assigning of these markers throughout history (often color coded and forced upon the body) that allowed for the easy identification of those who “needed” to be seen. During the McCarthy era, locating and marking the homosexual was necessary in order to prevent the “effeminization” of the American male. The film *Tea and Sympathy*, through Minnelli’s aestheticized coloring, brings to the surface the frenetic attempt to stamp and define an identity with a predetermined color.

In the late 1930s a debate took place between the Catholic traditionalist G. K. Chesterton and the aesthete journalist Robert Lynd over the meaning behind the wearing of the color pink. Chesterton noted “the current tendency to express party politics by means of Shirts,”¹¹ and added that pink was “the essentially false and negative colour because it is the dilution of something that is rich and glowing or nothing.”¹² This “anaem[ic]” color is a wobbly

middle-of-the-road color, especially in political matters. "There is," Chesterton continued, "a merely pink humanitarianism which I dislike even more than the *real* Red Communism."¹³

Lynd refutes Chesterton in his essay "In Defence of Pink." Lynd reminds his reader that pink is chosen in most English-speaking societies as the "symbol of perfection,"¹⁴ particularly as it is linked with high society or the leisure class. For Lynd this class position finds itself in relationship to "pink humanitarianism": "I have never blinded myself to the fact that in politics I am a wobbling sentimentalist! I have said to myself, 'If only everybody were as pink as I, all this nonsense in the world would end in a week. If only everybody wobbled like me, how well everybody would get on together.'"¹⁵

We recognize pink as the feminine marker of gender from birth, and such markers of identification come under careful scrutiny in a masculinist society. A careless positioning of a feminine code onto/into a masculine marker could spell the difference for the well-being of one's manly virtue. And as both Alan Sinfield and George Chauncey reveal in their historical accounts of urban middle-class masculinity in turn-of-the-century England and America (respectively), the fear of women or the potential threat of feminizing men posed a serious reconsideration of male (self) representation of virility.¹⁶

Sinfield points out that, historically, "effeminate" behavior has been accepted in circles of the English leisure class and intellectuals. Before his trial in 1895, Oscar Wilde's behavior was not necessarily seen as deviant or morally objectionable. As Sinfield shows, however, the upshot of Wilde's trial for sodomy was that the effeminate male would no longer merely be judged as an effete figure of an intellectual or leisure class. He would now be identified as the homosexual. While "[e]ffeminacy preceded the category of homosexual . . ." it would now "[overlap] with and [influence] the period of its development."¹⁷

In urban centers of America at the turn of the century, as Chauncey shows in *Gay New York*, the male middle class witnessed women entering the new industrial work force, women teaching the boys of America in schools, and (distressingly) the presence of the "invert" in public spaces. (The invert was the male figure who had a "female soul," dressed in women's clothes, wore makeup, and most often took a woman's name.) These inescapable social factors aroused an anxiety over the very "manhood" of the male heterosexual. In the era of Theodore Roosevelt, defining American manhood became the major order of business. Men consumed themselves with "muscularity, rough sports, prizefighting, and hunting as an antidote to the overcivilization of

American men, . . . the cause was taken up in newspapers, boys' clubs, and backyard lots throughout the nation."¹⁸ All the physical rigor and construction of the homosocial was in response to this perceived effeminization of the American male. Of course, the scapegoat for this rising homosocial would be the invert, who marked what the American male must not become in terms of behavior and self-representation. The turn-of-the-century's attempt to eliminate softness, effeminization, and overcivilization from America's cultural habits would move into high gear under the auspices of the McCarthy and Eisenhower era. The cataloguing of social markers by gender played an important role in the way post-World War II America would construct its political parameters. *Tea and Sympathy* highlights this delicately balanced, stridently defensive version of 1950s male anxiety.

What becomes apparent in this evolvment of male anxiety during the first half of the twentieth century, where it intersects with politics and gender identification, is that American culture and politics were viewed by a male middle class as being threatened by women and the homosexual—both of whom, ironically, must necessarily maintain the normative condition for the homosocial precisely through their difference. To compound this half-century of male-identified anxiety, the once easily identified invert became more difficult to see. He was more difficult to see because many men who exercised any sort of homosexual desire were fearful of being read as effeminate (and thereby read as homosexual) and so acted like "regular guys."

The publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 further fueled the anxiety of that which could not be seen. Kinsey's report informed the American public of the ubiquity of homosexual activity. Its most striking and threatening aspect, however, was that, as John D'Emilio summarizes, "homosexuals came from all walks of life, and . . . did not conform in appearance or mannerism to the popular stereotype."¹⁹ Both the homosexual and the Communist were viewed as domestic and international security risks as well. On the home front, the homosexual (or the "sexual pervert") threatened not only American youth but also governmental agencies.

According to a U.S. Senate report in 1950 by the Committee on Expenditures in Executive Departments, the influx of merely "one sex pervert [*sic*] in a Government agency tends to have a corrosive influence upon his fellow employees. . . . One homosexual can pollute a Government office."²⁰ More terrifying, however, was the danger of blackmail for the homosexual. American secrets were in peril, ironically, because of the homosexual's fear of being discovered. It is noteworthy that in April 1953, shortly before the Broadway

opening of *Tea and Sympathy*, Eisenhower issued “an executive order barring gay men and lesbians from all federal jobs.”²¹

The invisible Communist and the equally invisible homosexual were frequently conflated in political discourse. Arthur Schlesinger described Communism as “something secret, sweaty and furtive, like nothing so much, in the phrase of one wise observer of modern Russia, as homosexuals in a boy’s school.”²² Republican Senator Kenneth Wherry of Nebraska could not put this anxiety more succinctly: “I don’t say every homosexual is a subversive, and I don’t say every subversive is a homosexual. But a man of low morality is a menace in the government, whatever he is, and they are tied up together.”²³

A color is assigned to the homosexual, like the Communist, in order to talk about this sexual/juridical anxiety that threatened to seep into sacrosanct American politics. Pink and red in 1950s America marked the invisible space of fear that urgently needed to be made visible. Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy* and its making into a film are seated directly at the intersection of discourse where the American masculine subject found himself nervously guarding every performance he made on a day-to-day basis. Those making the film were extremely sensitive to these current affairs of state.

In October 1953, when the major studios jumped to purchase *Tea and Sympathy* film rights, Anderson refused to sell to Samuel Goldwyn unless the company retained a “*sine qua non* that the leading lady solve the boy’s problem by giving herself to him sexually” and, further, that the film “kept the boy’s problem [as springing] from the *malicious* charge of homosexuality . . . homosexuality was not to be glossed over.”²⁴ In fact, the main reason for the PCA’s continuous rejection of a possible screenplay was the consistent usage of the word homosexual or its implications. After confronting the zealous denunciations by the PCA and the Legion of Decency, MGM’s strategy was to erase any and all references—explicit or implicit—to homosexuality from the screenplay. With other studios competing for the scripts, Dore Schary (vice president in charge of production at MGM) announced that the character of the boy would not point to the “question of homosexuality” but rather would “center the boy’s problem on the fact that he was an ‘off horse.’”²⁵ Schary, echoing a popular and comforting sentiment of 1950s America, saw the boy’s “problem” as one of “cowardice and lack of manliness.” He later recalls how dumbfounded he was when the Legion insisted on the woman’s punishment simply because she had “given the young student a *healthy sex experience*.”²⁶ Schary’s relationship to this film highlights the liberal attitude that straddled

the extreme right and left positions of both contemporary gender relations and politics in Hollywood. His stance, and it was often an unpopular one, would distress the studio bosses at MGM, not only with this film but also with many of the projects on which he worked.

Schary pushed hard for the making of such films as *Crossfire* (1947), *Battleground* (1949), and *Tea and Sympathy*. Films like *Crossfire* were hard sells, and Schary often put himself on the line for them. Of course, *Crossfire* was based on a novel, *The Brick Foxhole*, in which homosexuality was central to its plot. Schary, in part because of the Production Code, changed the homosexual to a Jew. As with *Tea and Sympathy*, the homosexual was erased.

Tea and Sympathy (like *Crossfire*) was important for Schary not because of homosexuality but because of the speech act of smearing. Schary based his moral agenda on his ability to work with others because they were good workers, not because of their political affiliations—or their homosexuality. His middle-of-the-road liberalism maintained the homosexual as a figure of pity and invisibility. This stance would invariably inform MGM’s final version of *Tea and Sympathy*.

With the bidding war in high gear for the film rights of *Tea and Sympathy*, MGM “raised the ante to the then astonishing sum of \$400,000, of which \$300,000 would be withheld until Anderson turned in a filmable script.”²⁷ This filmable script would include a prologue and an epilogue that would punish the wife’s wrongs. This script would also translate the question of homosexuality into a conflict of defining masculinity.

Between January and August 1955, a series of screenplay rewrites was undertaken by Anderson and MGM. To convey to Shurlock his frustration with the archaic structure of the Code and the continuous intervention of the Legion of Decency, Schary sent him a letter (dated May 16, 1955) with a copy of an article in *Look* titled “How Much Do We Know about Men?”²⁸ The article was flanked by a full-page vertical photograph of a small boy looking up to the statue of David (whose genitalia are covered by a fig leaf). It was written by Lawrence K. Frank, who was, according to *Look*’s biographical account of the author, the “former chairman of the International Preparatory Commission for the International Congress on Mental Health.” The essay attempts to underscore changing gender relations in America in terms of society’s constituted system of values; it briefly mentions homosexuality, but mainly focuses the question on what it means to be a “real man” (i.e., “modern” man, who could now share “in baby and child care, in cooking, dishwashing, house-keeping”) without threatening the definitions of male and female.²⁹ Schary’s

basic contention was that if this masculinity question could be discussed in a major national magazine, ought it not be brought to the screen? Schary (and so MGM), of course, won the debate.

On September 1, 1955, Shurlock informed Schary that Anderson's revisions "now meet the requirements of the Production Code." The moral heat, however, was far from turned off. On September 25, 1955, the *New York Times* ran an article, "MGM Solves Its *Tea and Sympathy* Script Problem," in which writer Tom Pryor interviewed MGM unit producer Pandro S. Berman. Albeit skewed to shift the emphasis away from homosexuality and toward the conflict of defining masculinity, the article conveys the certainty that the audience will recognize what the script is really about. Berman states:

The theme of the play is essentially this: what is manliness? We haven't changed that at all. The boy is regarded by fellow students and the house-master as an "off horse" because he doesn't flex his muscles and knock himself out climbing mountains or playing basketball. To them he is soft physically and becomes suspect. They conveniently pigeon-hole their standards for manliness and anyone who doesn't conform is an oddball. *We never say in the film that the boy has homosexual tendencies—I don't believe the word homosexual was actually spoken in the play either—but any adult who has ever heard of the word and understands its meaning will clearly understand this suspicion in the film.*³⁰

For the MGM producers, smearing, or the malicious scapegoating of those with a degree of difference, was what the film was about. By this point in the making of the film, the homosexual who could not be seen because of his ability to elide interpretation would now render himself on the screen and become recognizable while remaining unseen. Berman announced this invisible presence by marking his invisibility.

The *New York Times* article threw the Legion into a tailspin. How could this notion of "suspicion" still remain at this point in the production? They still, however, carried the hammer and nails for keeping the closet shut. Fearful of losing moral control over the film industry, the Very Reverend Monsignor Thomas F. Little wrote to Shurlock on September 27, 1955, expressing his wish "respectively, to advise you of our impression of the proposed story changes." From published reports that the reverend had seen, there merely seemed "an effort . . . to color and mask the essential offensiveness of the questionable material . . . hence [there is] no elimination [*sic*] of the grounds for serious moral objection."

Shurlock's response to the reverend was to tell him of his surprise at these published reports and of his intention to bring them immediately to the attention of Berman and Schary. But his gesture was only one of perfunctory politeness. By this time the film had been approved by the PCA. Shurlock, however, offered the Legion the opportunity to write its own version of the epilogue. Their rewrite points to the discursive weight of the Legion's attempt to control social meaning.

The Legion's corrections to the epilogue reflect their need for a transparently clear reading of Laura's transgressions and her punishments. Their rewrite left no question, either, about Tom's satisfactory transition from suffering young man to well-adjusted married heterosexual.

Anderson: These are terrible things to write you, Tom, about guilt and right and wrong. But you are old enough to know that when you drop a pebble in the water there are ever widening circles of ripples. There are always consequences.

Legion: These are terrible things to write you, Tom, about sin and guilt. But you are old enough to know that when you drop a pebble in the water there are ripples that may carry afar a burden of good or of evil.

And, from Anderson: Dear Tom, have a good life, a full life, an understanding life.

The Legion, however, sought to emphasize this portion of the letter with: Dear Tom, I was so pleased to hear that you were married.

While Anderson's version survives over the Legion's more egregious (yet banal) reworking, it still needed to fall between the Legion's moral condemnation and the PCA's enforced use of the unseen but ubiquitous homosexual who acted as the marker of difference and necessarily reinforced Tom's heterosexual union. The framing story of *Tea and Sympathy* is clearly the container of the closet.

After two years of debate, *Tea and Sympathy* would begin production. Just before the film's release, Dore Schary sent a letter to Arthur Loew deriding MGM's handling of *Tea and Sympathy*. "We abandoned a principle," he wrote, "alienated a good and valuable writer, [and] . . . hurt a valuable picture." His letter points to the instability and unreliability of the moral and political ground on which Hollywood finds itself when confronted with a socially taboo subject. Schary was frustrated with "the two or three people sitting in a room [who] insisted on words that are trite and self-righteous." Even though MGM had a "good battleground on which to wage a fight . . . we have retreated

and run away."³¹ According to Schary, two months after he sent this letter to Loew, and one month after *Tea and Sympathy* was released, Loew handed him a letter from an anonymous "loyal studio employee" that listed an array of charges, including accusations that Schary had had sex with MGM "glamorous female stars" and that he had "encouraged male stars to lose to [him] in gin games in exchange for assigning them juicy roles."³² Schary was out of a job. While *Tea and Sympathy* was not the deciding factor in his firing, it certainly played a pivotal role in the tense dynamics between Schary and MGM executives.

AESTHETICIZING THE TEXT

Reading the autobiographies of Dore Schary and Vincente Minnelli, one is struck by what can best be described as the cordial relationship between them. Schary mentions Minnelli as director, and Minnelli recalls Schary as the outsider who would be friendly enough to send him a kind letter when he was embarking on a new project. Schary handled the front line of production and Minnelli made sure that the product was delivered, but to see this relationship as merely one of a labor/management situation is to dismiss the ways in which they overrode the "battleground" (to use Schary's terminology) that existed because of the Code and the studio system. They both showed a certain determination, albeit directed in different ways, that challenged the constraints under which they often had to work. While Schary negotiated the politics of the studio system, Minnelli constructed a film that would hyperbolize and aestheticize the anxiety of American men over the possible effeminization of their own masculinity.

There were particular arenas during the 1940s and 1950s where the display of the male body as homoerotic was circulated. Films such as Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947), the male erotica films from Apollo and Zenith studios, and the paintings of Paul Cadmus point to this representation of homosexual male desire. To declare Minnelli's hyperbolization of the male body—consider Gene Kelly in *The Pirate* and *An American in Paris*, or the young studs in *Tea and Sympathy*—as the site of such desire is potentially (and probably) valid; the homosexual, however, is not necessarily *identifiable* as such. While Pandro Berman earlier articulated the homosexual into visibility, we still do not see a homosexual. Tom, identified as creative and gentle (rehearsing his "feminine traits"), is *not* a homosexual. We can, however, see masculine anxiety and its attendant homophobia.

It is the masculinized figure who is caught in Minnelli's aesthetically frenetic *mise-en-scène*.³³ Minnelli's melodrama explores an aesthetic *mise-en-scène* that visually heightens the cultural anxiety of masculinity in postwar America. Traditionally, melodrama has been regarded as the genre of anxiety constructed through a symptomatic *mise-en-scène* (heightened gesture, color, etc.) as a way of revealing the repressed middle-class angst of sexual desire (usually the woman's). But to recommend the genre as only a symptomatic rendering of the repressed is to foreclose an analysis that looks to discover the ways in which those symptoms are actually produced and represented. Following the tradition of the historical aesthete (Huysmans, Firkbank, Van Vechten, etc.), Minnelli practices a process of aestheticization on the *mise-en-scène* in order to make visible and hyperbolize the cultural anxiety of masculinity. Indeed, melodrama and its tradition of a "melodramatic imagination" are historically constituted as a practice of heightened representation.

While Minnelli's films need to be examined individually, one can argue that they visually render the hyperactivity of men's anxiety toward the production of their own masculinity. In *Tea and Sympathy*, the hypermasculinity of the homosocial does not necessarily deliver a representation of homosexual desire, but actually works to represent American homophobia of the 1950s. In effect, homosexual desire is not met not only because of its (en)forced silence but also because of the indetermination of exactly what that homosexual desire is. What can be displayed, however, is the aggressivity of the masculine figure within the homosocial grouping.³⁴ The anxiety of homosocial desire between men on the screen—homophobia—becomes that which can be seen. It is, in other words, not so much a question of locating homosexual desire as it is a question of illustrating homosexual panic.³⁵ In much of Minnelli's work he constructs a text whereby these de-sexed and hypermasculinized figures are pressed within and against the service of an aestheticized *mise-en-scène* that collapses any supposed verisimilitude surrounding the social order of masculinity, as well as pushing to the surface the entrenched homophobia of that social order. Even though Minnelli could not escape the shackles of the framing story demanded for *Tea and Sympathy*, he did direct a film that elides the proscription by aestheticizing the *mise-en-scène*, or the place in which these men cinematically reside.

Minnelli himself continually experienced an ongoing conflict about masculinity. The use of terms such as *shy* to define himself defy a seemingly more potent personal query. "I was never told that creativity was unmanly," Minnelli recounts,

Looking at Mr. Frazier's [Minnelli's first boss at Marshall Field's where he did window displays in the early 1920s] assistant, a William Bendix type, and talking to the other display men who were all married and raising families, I saw by their example that one could function as the male animal and still give vent to his so-called feminine traits. As a result, I wasn't cowed at this impressionable age into more conventionally male avenues of expression. I am thankful for that. I'd make a miserable football coach.³⁶

Minnelli's effete demeanor would clearly put him in constant conflict with the anxiety of "what it means to be a man" in 1950s America. Minnelli's placement of the male bodies in *Tea and Sympathy* against his aestheticized mise-en-scène reveal "the hystericalised body [offering] a key emblem of that convergence [psychic and corporeal], since it is a body pre-eminently invested with meaning, a body become the place for the inscription of highly emotional messages that cannot be written elsewhere, and cannot be articulated verbally."³⁷

Al's decision to inform Tom of his patriarchal order (as it were) is bracketed by the two boys' pathetic attempt to help each other understand the socially constructed turmoil in which they are forced to live. Tom asks his friend to show him what it is that he does "wrong." He wants to know how he can be more "manly." Al offers to show Tom how to walk—"like a man." This masculine strut is parodied until it collapses under the strain of its own laborious construction, to be finally revealed as a socially constructed joke. It is at this moment in the film that masculine anxiety, confronted with its own ridiculous construction, can no longer support itself. Al, pressed within and against the mise-en-scène of the Minnellian text and finally caught in the vestiges of masculinity, can't understand why walking a particular way is manlier than any other.

But it is color, as is often the case with Minnelli, that will motivate the intricate possibility of reading this text beyond the surface narrative and will prove to be the activating agent for revealing the dialogic relationships between *Tea and Sympathy* and the historical world. It is apposite that just as color is used in the social and historical spheres to mark what is seemingly ubiquitous but unlocatable, it is used by Minnelli to confuse the rules—he places color in the film in order to reveal the production of this silenced meaning.

If color is used on the contemporary political scene to locate the unlocatable by McCarthy and friends, Minnelli would make certain that this peculiar hyperactivity to color code would be ironically and hyperbolically rendered on



Al (Darryl Hickman) teaches Tom (John Kerr) how to "walk like a man" in *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) (Courtesy Photofest).

the screen. In 1962, Minnelli states that the "film-maker must have a point of view toward his subject."³⁸ This point of view will determine the way in which the filmmaker will construct the subject from which he or she is working: "In each case all [the filmmaker's] decisions which determine style are, in turn, determined by your subject. You cannot impose this style. It must come from the subject."³⁹ Making the film must be considered a "situation as real life."

Minnelli's meticulous attention to the proper selection and utilization of color within the text works in direct relation with not simply his individualized worldview but also his complex relationships within the world. In order to develop a sense of color one must "[learn] to see color. We are all surrounded by color if we will only learn to notice it."⁴⁰ The play *Tea and Sympathy* presses two colors into the service of its mise-en-scène. While Anderson assigns these colors to characters' "essence," Minnelli engulfs the characters in these color assignments, at once immersing and suffocating them within the gendered roles they are culturally forced to play. Yellow is marked as Laura's color; it indirectly suggests Laura's "essence [as] gentleness."⁴¹ In the film Laura is framed by yellow curtains in her kitchen; at other times she will be

sitting in her yellow chair in her living room or surrounded by her yellow kitchen bowls.

Anderson marks blue as the color for men who are desperately clinging to their boyhood, unable to manage the cultural conditions of manhood. He puts Tom in a blue suit before his date with Elbe (the "town whore"), where he states, "Put me in a blue suit and I look like a kid."⁴² Tom will wear blue pajamas, pants, and shirts throughout the film.

Minnelli, however, disperses these colors throughout the text so that they blend into variant hues in order to associate the characters' psychological and emotional states. He weaves the yellow and blue motifs through the narrative in order to formulate intratextual references to the internal psychology of the characters. In the beginning of the film, for example, we see Laura in her garden while we hear Tom sing a love ballad from his bedroom window. As they convene in the garden, Tom comments on her "green thumb" (green, of course, being the admixture of yellow and blue), at which point she realizes with surprise that this stunning fecundity only blossomed after her arrival at Chilton.

Green also symbolizes blue's need for yellow and yellow's need for blue. This sought-after balance of blue and yellow represents, in the film, the "necessary" link between the socially constructed gender extremes. The missing blue in Laura's life is foregrounded in Laura and Bill's inadequate sex life. Laura, when she first encounters Tom in her garden, comments that her garden needs more blue. Tom, however, will compensate for Laura's lack of blue by giving her a package of blue forget-me-not flower seeds, which he places on the dashboard of her blue/green car.

Later, Laura will bring some yellow roses to Ellie, grown from her garden and wrapped in blue paper, after she overhears Tom's phone call that establishes his appointed rendezvous (in order to prove his manhood) with Ellie. When Tom is about to leave for Ellie's place, Laura is dressed in a green evening gown. Tom's blue suit still represents the "little boy" who, under the regulatory control of the social order, desperately seeks to become a "regular guy." Blue is both the little boy and the social demand of that boy's masculine behavior. Tom's acceptance of yellow fulfills the acceptance of "gentleness" into the enforced masculinity of blue. This blending of blue and yellow is Laura's urgent plea to imbue the hypermasculine structure with its deprived gentleness, as well as to inject herself with the blue that is missing in her life.

Minnelli considered film a painter's canvas upon which the admixture of colors would work in harmony, yet never achieve an exact relationship to the

colors in the "real" world. His love of Whistler, Van Gogh, and Matisse points to his stylistic echoing of these painters' use of color to aestheticize fleeting moments of time and space. These painters' brushstrokes did not seek to simulate and fix an identical replica of "reality"; rather, they rendered the color of the "real world" as they saw it. When Minnelli stated that the film must be considered a "situation as real life," it is in the context of placing that situation within the filmmaker's point of view. The cinema afforded Minnelli the opportunity to explore his painterly aesthetics in "real life."

Peter Lehman, speaking in terms of normative masculinist representation, argues that cinematic representation depends upon a "realist" aesthetic to maintain ideological masculinist meaning. "Our culture asserts," Lehman suggests, "and realist representation participates in reinforcing the belief of a fixed relation between the male body and connotations of masculinity—to be a strong man is to look like a strong man, and to be a weak man is to look like a weak man."⁴³ If the Hollywood film depends upon "realist" representations to subtend normative practices of masculinity, Minnelli's aestheticized mise-en-scène (a transgression of the "real") serves to disrupt those normative representations. Through his process of aestheticization, Minnelli makes visible American hypermasculinity by placing his men within a textual place that does not match the anticipated Hollywood equation of "realist" mise-en-scène equals "strong and powerful" men. In effect, those "real" men are made to look ridiculous and, indeed, hyperbolic in their masculine constructions when placed within Minnelli's aestheticized text.

In *Tea and Sympathy*, Minnelli's dispersion and reassigning of color realigns the cultural dictates of marking and foreclosing identity; color in a Minnelli film refuses to stabilize meaning. His colors blend with one another, disseminate at multiple emotional levels of the text, and, thereby, ironically play with the historical and cultural assumptions ("pink for girls, blue for boys") that seek to totalize representations of meaning and identity.

NOTES

I would like to thank the following for their continuous support during the writing of this essay: Steve Mamber, Vivian Sobchack, Peter Wollen, Chon Noriega, Janet Staiger, Dana Polan, Ed O'Neill, David Pendleton, Daniel Hendrickson, Marc Siegel, Suzanne Gerstner, Charles Silver at MoMA, and Sam Gill and staff at the Academy Library of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles.

1. The story of the making of *Tea and Sympathy* is well documented—especially the events involving the MPAA, the Legion of Decency, and MGM. See Jerold Simmons,

- "The Production Code under New Management: Geoffrey Shurlock, *The Bad Seed*, and *Tea and Sympathy*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 2–10. See also Stephen Harvey, *Directed by Vincente Minnelli* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harper and Row, 1989), 247–51.
2. Memo dated April 26, 1955. All sources regarding the interactions among the MPAA, the PCA, the Legion of Decency, and MGM, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the MGM Production Code files held at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.
3. Anonymous, *The Reporter*, September 25, 1956, 3, 11.
4. The play's ending proves somewhat complicated insofar as the ambiguity of its ending is not completely free of homophobic conditions. As we will see, the suggestion in any way that one was a homosexual in 1950s America—or 1990s America for that matter—was a slanderous act.
5. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, rev. ed. (1981; New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 112.
6. *Ibid.*, 114 (emphasis added).
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3. It is especially instructive to consider Sedgwick's work in terms of the discursive practices within the making of this film and the homophobic weight that is carried by those practices as they are constituted within Hollywood. As Sedgwick later posits: "the establishment of the spectacle of the homosexual closet as a presiding guarantor of rhetorical community, of authority—someone else's authority—over world making discursive terrain . . . extends vastly beyond the question of the homosexual" (230).
8. I'd like to thank Ed O'Neill for numerous discussions on issues of homosociality and homosexuality as well as for allowing me to read his unpublished paper, "Poisonous Queers." Delivered at the Berkeley Conference on Violence and Cinema, spring 1993.
9. Robert Anderson, *Tea and Sympathy* (New York: Random House, 1953), 94.
10. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 274.
11. G. K. Chesterton, *As I Was Saying* (1936; Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1966), 109.
12. *Ibid.*, 110.
13. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
14. Robert Lynd, "In Defence of Pink," in his *In Defence of Pink* (London: J. M. Dent, 1937), 2.
15. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
16. Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Moment: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
17. Sinfield, *Wilde Moment*, 74.
18. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 113.
19. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 42.
20. Quoted in *ibid.*
21. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 293.
22. Quoted in Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 43. I'd like to thank Marc Siegel for pointing out this material.
23. Quoted in *ibid.*
24. Anderson, according to Shurlock's memo, which recounts the transaction between Anderson and Goldwyn, originally conceived of the film version for "art house" and European markets. This transaction also highlights the centrality of the "charge of homosexuality" as "malicious." See above, note 4 (emphasis added).
25. MPAA memo, November 2, 1953. When MGM finally had won the rights to the film, Schary would define the boy's problem as a "fear of sexual impotence" (MPAA memo, April 29, 1955).
26. Dore Schary, *Heyday* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979) (emphasis added).
27. Harvey, *Directed by Vincente Minnelli*, 249.
28. *Look*, May 17, 1955, 52–60.
29. The Kinsey report clearly had much to do with "homosexuality" finding its space of utterance in the American vernacular. The word "homosexual" in the article is mentioned only once to suggest its possible existence. But even here in the *Look* article, the utterance is lumped with the "new" social anomalies of heterosexuality: "It is believed by some that male homosexuality is increasing, and there probably is much more 'petting' and 'necking' between young men and women today." Homosexuality is "believed by some" to be on the "increase," but this "believed" is at best merely a hypothesis because it certainly remains unseen.
30. Thomas Pryor, "MGM Solves Its *Tea and Sympathy* Script Problem," *New York Times*, September 25, 1955 (emphasis added). While Berman is technically right that the word *homosexual* is not mentioned in the play, *queer* is used as well as rather blatant inferences to what the *suspicion* is all about.
31. Schary, *Heyday*, 311–12.
32. *Ibid.*, 5. It seems that there were two camps at MGM regarding Schary. One camp was frustrated by his continuous push for the "message film" and his undermining of the import of the traditional MGM entertainment vehicles, while the other camp saw him progressively moving the studio forward.
33. *Mise-en-scène* is understood here as everything that the director chooses to put within the filmic frame (props, wardrobe, lighting, bodies). While this essay focuses on Minnelli's use of color as a strategy for aestheticizing the sociohistorical conditions of the narrative, my larger project considers Minnelli's use/choice of (in particular) the male body as an important variable in the aestheticization of the text. Peter Brooks's essay "Melodrama, Body, Revolution" begins to reconsider the body as the site that reveals (through its performance in melodrama) its historical and disciplined inscription. See the essay in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 11–24.
34. A number of Hollywood films made during this period, such as Edward Dmyt-