

"The Hardest, The Most Difficult Film:" Todd Haynes' *Safe* as Feminist Film Praxis

Or: "What the fuck is this?"

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While Todd Haynes has been celebrated as the poster child for New Queer Cinema for at least two decades now, he has in fact established himself as a director of a wide range of genres, including the biopic and the women's film. Indeed, Haynes' engagement with and commitment to films about women is constant—even his works nominally about men, such as his faux biopics like *Velvet Goldmine* and even *Dottie Gets Spanked* find women at their core, as Julia and Noah have shown so well today. With the success of his most recent work, notably a miniseries for HBO, we are positioned now to reconsider Haynes' oeuvre in light of his most salient and persistent themes and concerns. This move from the art house cinema circuit to cable television, for example, invites one to consider the gendered implications of shifting exhibition venues from the movie theater to television, a form situated in the domesticated space of the home, and historically tied to women's daily lives, as Lynn Spigel's and others work on television has argued. We might also think of Andreas Huyssen's now canonical work on the historical and critical perception of mass culture as feminine. I invoke these foundational works in the field because their impact on the study of gender and mass culture has less to do with the content of specific texts than the significance of placing such texts in social and cultural histories of exhibition and reception. They focus, to a large extent, on the *form* in which mass culture is expressed and perceived. Investigations into the gendering of say, the place of the television in the home, or mass culture generally, help us to

understand the cultural filters and interpretive grids through which a text is understood and received.

In this paper, I want to foreground the ways Haynes' work has been situated and how this has privileged certain sorts of readings and frameworks over others. In many ways, *Mildred Pierce* has forced the issue, making Haynes' fans, critics and followers take seriously the way his entire body of work—from his profoundly moving representation of Karen Carpenter's painfully slow suicide via anorexia to his remake of the mid-century women's film—has always been about women. Haynes' himself is keenly aware of the rigid categories through which his work is all too readily interpreted. In a conversation with Kate Winslet for *Interview Magazine*, Todd Haynes sums up his complicated, and ambivalent, position in the history of independent cinema; he says:

By the time I finished *Poison*, the New Queer Cinema was branded and I was associated with this. In many ways it formed me as a filmmaker, like as a feature filmmaker I never set out to be.... But by the same token, I was so eager to move on from it and do something quite different in my second film, *Safe*, with Julianne Moore. We would take it to gay film festivals because it was the second film by the gay filmmaker or whatever and people were like, "What the fuck is this?" I found that film to be just as much an indictment of hetero-normative society as *Poison* was, but without gay characters as the subjects. It was still coming from me. It was still my perspective...

Haynes sums up well the limitations that continue to frame his work and circumscribe the film criticism it generates. In my talk today I would like to attempt

to answer this central question so many have asked about *Safe*—*what the fuck is this?* Notably, the answer to this question not only allows us to draw out and solidify the foundations of Haynes’ “perspective,” but also aims to honor Haynes’ own wish “to move on” to a more complex system of meanings, one informed by New Queer Cinema but not limited to it—in fact, in tracing a filmic genealogy, I suggest that his perspective is founded by a critique of hetero-normative society that long precedes New Queer Cinema.

As Haynes himself is fully aware, by being identified as “the gay filmmaker or whatever,” his work is marked and manacled by identity politics. His gayness operates as the determining factor in the reception of his work, over-determining the interpretive grid through which his works tend to be perceived. For instance, although none of us today presented explicitly queer analyses of the films we’ve discussed, nor have we focused centrally on any of his gay characters, our panel was sponsored by the queer caucus but not the women’s caucus. This is of little surprise in that Haynes is immediately legible within the history of queer cinema, whether or not a given text explicitly addresses queer content. However, Haynes’ own trajectory, most recently punctuated with *Mildred Pierce*, seriously troubles this emplacement, asking us to rethink his perspective in terms of feminism’s longstanding deconstruction of heteronormative gender roles and the violence they do women’s psychic and social formations.

While his position as an out gay director made his “association” with New Queer Cinema a forgone conclusion of identity politics, Haynes’ own stated

identification with the feminist movement offers a different sort of critical enframing; in his introduction to *Three Screenplays*, he asserts:

Feminist theory has left an indelible mark on my own critical—and creative—thinking . . . For me, everything I questioned about what it meant to be a man – and how much my sexuality would perpetually challenge those meanings—could be found in arguments posed by feminists. What can I say? I identified.

This identification with feminist theory—clearly asserted with much less ambivalence than his noted “branding” as a director of New Queer Cinema cited above—points to an altogether different critical rubric, that is, a feminist enframing that allows for a radical rethinking of Haynes as a feminist filmmaker. In fact, my aim is to situate him in a genealogy of feminist filmmaking dating back to at least the 1970s—a period which, as Julia argued so well in her paper, figured centrally in Haynes’ *Velvet Goldmine* as hopeful of the possibilities of sexual and gender revolution *vis-a-vis* fantasy, fluidity, gender play and the like. No wonder, then, that for Haynes, the 1980s figures as a period of horrifying oppression, particularly for women. If Arthur and Mandy are despondent in 1984—dressed in all black, as Morrissey says, because black is how they feel on the inside—by 1987, the small window of hope offered by the 70s has disappeared entirely, leaving Carol White in an affective and historical abyss of despair. It is little wonder that Carol says little, since the backlash against feminism had so thoroughly foreclosed a language for women to express and resist their oppression by the time of Reagan’s second term.

It is this historical context that returns me to the trope of enframing. In *Safe*, Carol is constantly framed and reframed by the strictures of patriarchy and its surveilling gaze—both objectifying and policing. Her body is restricted and confined in scene after scene, into smaller and smaller spaces, including the space of her own body, as Becky’s paper suggested. And yet, it is this very enframing that points to that other Heideggerian sense of *Gestell* –to enframe, as in to gather together to bring forth some revelation about the world; “Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological,” according to Heidegger. So, by enframing Haynes’ work within feminist theory, as he himself avers, we can begin to gather together his works in a different critical apparatus that I find revelatory. What is revealed, in fact, is a central concern and thoroughgoing critique of what Teresa de Lauretis has famously named the *technologies of gender*. Drawing on Foucault’s insights, De Lauretis theorizes the interlocking social technologies or techno-social apparatuses that operate to produce and reproduce gender as a socio-cultural construct and a semiotic apparatus.

In Haynes’ films we witness this apparatus at work. According to de Lauretis, “the construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation” (5); she turns to Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) as an exemplum of a cinematic exploration of these very technologies, one that accomplishes the two-fold project of forwarding “a radical critique of patriarchal, bourgeois culture” and an affirmative cinematic statement on behalf of women as social subjects” (127). Of course, Akerman’s “transformation of vision” continues to

resonate to this day—and is certainly a vision with which Haynes identified. In an interview with Larry Gross, Haynes' addresses the direct influences on his film: "I was looking at movies like *Jeanne Dielman* by Chantal Akerman and eventually *2001* for some stylistic pointers, so I was looking at things that were extreme." *Safe* is an explicit engagement with, and homage to, the inventive and unique feminist film praxis of filmmakers such as Akerman, Yvonne Rainer, Laura Mulvey and filmmakers like Lis Rhodes, co-founder of the feminist film collective, Circles, in the UK. Because it embraces a feminist film aesthetic that formally evokes women's time and space—now an established chronotope of feminist film praxis—Hayne's *Safe*, by his own estimation, is indeed, "the hardest, the most difficult film [he's] made for audiences." In *Safe*, Haynes takes up "the project of transforming vision by redeploying the forms and processes of representation of a social subject, women," that, sadly, all too often remain unrepresentable to this day (DI 145). More than simply reference Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and in its domestic ennui, implicitly evoke Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*—pointedly key texts from the feminism's first and second-waves—*Safe* is a work of feminist counter-cinema, emulating and honoring the cinematic elements of *Jeanne Dielman*, including the distanced involvement, the rejection of psychological interiority, the repetitive rhythm and order of domesticity, the minimal use of reverse shots, dialog and other forms of suture that are norms of cinematic representation, which Annette Kuhn, de Lauretis and other feminist film scholars have anatomized so well.

In this way, the answer to the imperative: "what the fuck is this?" is—*feminist filmmaking*—a form of film praxis that reflects a "certain configuration of issues and

formal problems,” that point to a “feminist *de-aesthetic*,” one which stresses the paradox of “women in language and culture.” *Safe*, and indeed several of his films, follow directly the path of early 60s & 70s feminist filmmaking, geared as they were to the “de-aestheticization of the female body”—and here again I defer to Becky’s reading of the materiality of Julianne Moore’s body, “to the de-sexualization of violence, the de-oedipalization of narrative, and so forth,” as de Lauretis sums up. These are the terms by which Haynes himself articulates the difficulty of the film; he points out: “the film creates expectations for a more linear, accessible type of film that it doesn’t fulfill.” (interview with Gross). It rejects the Oedipal trajectory underlining the institutional mode of representation; it is, to borrow de Lauretis’ phrase, “oedipal with a vengeance”. “As a form of political critique or critical politics...feminism not only has invented new strategies or created new texts but more important it has conceived a new social subject, women,” and this may be the indelible mark of feminism on the work of Todd Haynes, who, following Claire Johnston’s call for community and collaboration as central to feminist counter-cinema, has worked in conjunction with a range of film and art practitioners, from his lifelong pairing with producer Christine Vachon and frequent work with DP Maryse Alberti, to collective work with artists such as Kelly Reichert and Cindy Sherman.

In placing Haynes’ film within the history of feminist film practice, I also want to briefly gesture to the way it figures the relationship of queer studies to feminism more broadly. As queer theory emerged in the 90s, and New Queer Cinema along with it, feminism seemed to fade away--critiqued as essentialist and outdated in

comparison to the emergent terms of queer theory. By tracing the history of 70s feminism and 90s queer theory through these two key films (1975 & 1995), we begin to see the very closely related concerns of feminism and queer politics that tend to be disavowed, if and when they are even acknowledged. And yet, if we return to Haynes' perspective...his indictment of heteronormative society...and the gender roles it requires and enforces, we may begin to retrace the genealogy of queer theory, and queer cinema, back to feminism theory and praxis. For example, two key texts in the firmament of queer theory are, of course, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (a text that never used the word queer) and Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*—a book that employed the word queer rarely (I found only one use in my searches). While, on the other hand, it is De Lauretis' own history of feminism and film that led her to invent the term queer theory—one she herself is deeply ambivalent about today, in part, because of its very displacement of feminist concerns. By situating Haynes work, and certainly *Safe*, in the tradition of women's cinema, I am following de Lauretis' imperatives of nearly 30 years ago to shift the emphasis away from the artist behind the camera...and toward, instead, toward the cinema as a social technology" (134), as well as queer theory's general anti-essentialism—can we now see the indelible mark of feminism on Haynes' work? Must his works be forever marked solely by his identity as a gay man, and if so, what does this enframing conceal about Haynes work? About queer cinema and queer theory? I ask these questions because I, like Carol White, also remember the yellow wallpaper, and I hope to free the feminists who so shaped Haynes intellectual and aesthetic trajectory from the papering over



often affected in the film criticism and market branding. By enframing *Safe* and Haynes' work generally within the technologies of gender, we might begin to reconceive and re-enliven our understanding of feminist film theory and practice and its intersections with queer cinema and theory, which, together, twinned and entwined, "venture into the highly risky business," as de Lauretis once described, "of redefining aesthetic and formal knowledge."