

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Literatures and Cultural Studies Faculty
Publications and Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

Winter 2016

Melodrama, Sickness, and Paranoia: Todd Haynes and the Woman's Film

Linda Belau

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Ed Cameron

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/lcs_fac



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Belau, L., & Cameron, E. (2016). Melodrama, Sickness, and Paranoia: Todd Haynes and the Woman's Film. *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 46(2), 35-45. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/flm.2016.a643290>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literatures and Cultural Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

MELODRAMA, SICKNESS, AND PARANOIA: TODD HAYNES AND THE WOMAN'S FILM

Linda Belau
University of Texas – Pan American

Ed Cameron
University of Texas – Pan American

Filmmaker Todd Haynes has claimed that his films do not create cultural artifacts so much as appropriate and recombine the ones that audiences think they already know (MacDonald 2009, 57). This approach seems particularly true of the films in which Haynes puts the woman at the center of a melodrama—the genre traditionally associated with feminine sensibilities.¹ He self-consciously returns to generic touchstones like *Mildred Pierce* and *Far From Heaven*, for example, to explore the effects of the Motion Picture Production Code prohibitions and the paternal authority on which the classical woman's film relied (*Superstar* and *Safe*).² How many of the familiar tropes of the “woman's film” have made their way into today's film culture? What anxieties persist in a genre that now

has so much appeal precisely for its liberation from yesterday's film culture?

According to Mary Ann Doane, the classical woman's film is beset culturally by the problem of a woman's desire (a subject famously explored by writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Laura Mulvey). What can a woman *want*? Doane explains that filmic conventions of the period, not least the Hays Code restrictions, prevented “such an exploration,” leaving repressed material to emerge only indirectly, in “stress points” and “perturbations” within the film's *mise en scène* (Doane 1987, 13). Thus, Doane advocates what she calls a symptomatic reading of the classical woman's film in order not only to recover the repressed narrative content but also to reveal the patriarchal formal mechanism by which the classical Hollywood discourse “wishes...not to think” (Doane 1978, 44).



In that spirit, Haynes re-works the classical woman's film to express the return of repressed feminine desire—and anxiety—that had been concealed by the Hays Code in service to an essentially masculine experience of cinema. He sets out to remake the very subgroups Doane describes as traditionally feminine—the maternal

¹ According to Mary Ann Doane, “the woman's film of the 1940s and 1950s [...] has clearly had a strong influence on Haynes” and that “in Haynes's cinema, genre itself is cited and displaced.” Doane 2004, 2, 13. For another analysis of Haynes's theoretical significance, see Morrison 2007, “Todd Haynes in Theory and Practice.”

² Haynes has also commented that he does not know with his cinematic returns whether he is “interested in deconstructing those genres as much as in returning to them, using common knowledge about them to talk about other things.” Our argument is that he is doing both by critically updating the woman's film. See Wyatt 1993, 5.

melodrama, the love story, the medical-discourse film, and the paranoiac narrative—in order to articulate the limits of this classical form (Doane 1987, 36). With his recent HBO miniseries *Mildred Pierce*, for example, Haynes has managed to create a fractious maternal melodrama that could not have been produced at the time of the original film. With *Far From Heaven*, Haynes updates the woman's love story in a manner that could only be implied in Douglas Sirk's melodramas of the 1950s. Likewise, *Superstar* and *Safe* present Haynes's original offerings of the traditional medical-discourse film and the paranoiac narrative, respectively. Because the former two films are technically re-makes of classical woman's films, even set in the original historical period, they can best be understood as Haynes's post-Code "recombinations" of the classical Hollywood woman's film, dismantling the paternal metaphor that anchors it. The latter two radically update the genre to express the malaise that is symptomatic of the contemporary era, an era in which the fading of the paternal order and the accompanying loosening of repression, which were not characteristic of the Classical era, are now the norm. Through this interpretive framework, Haynes's woman's films move beyond the post-modern pastiche and into systematic cultural and aesthetic critique.

Mildred Pierce and the Maternal Melodrama

Typical of post-classical, post-Code cinema, Haynes's 2011 HBO adaptation of *Mildred Pierce* is able to show more or less directly not only what happens throughout the entirety of James M. Cain's novel but what obviously had to be *avoided* in Warner Brothers' 1945 original cinematic adaptation. Cain was regarded as one of the

"most cinematic of novelists," honing his skill while living in Los Angeles and working for Paramount and, later, for Columbia Pictures as a script assessor (Schwerz 2011, 88). But, as novelist, he had license to describe the parts of stories the movies could not depict. Curtiz's film version, for example, could not reveal Mildred's pre-divorce adulterous fling with Wally Burgan, Burt Pierce's former real estate partner. Cain could let Mildred express the desire seething beneath maternal responsibility, like a primal compulsion: "try as she would, she couldn't resist the physical effect he had on her, and when she finally yielded, the next hour was more wanton, more shamefully exciting, than any she remembered" (Cain 1989, 171). Curtiz could only pan to a mirror image of Mildred and Monte next to the fireplace, and there is hardly any cinematic suggestion of another "hour" of such lust.

Haynes returns to the novel with a vengeance, exceeding even Cain in his explicit depiction of sexual imagery. But nudity and open-handed expressions of desire are not just cheesecake for HBO audiences. This *Mildred* is summoning the novel's melodrama back from the film's melodrama, invoking the genre while undermining its ontologies. As Doane explains, "maternal melodramas are scenarios of separation, of separation and return, or of threatened separation—dramas which play out all the permutations of the mother/child relation" (Doane 1987, 73). In neo-Freudian terms, maternal melodramas play out the excruciating demand made on the mother to give her child up to the symbolic, or social, order. In this scenario, the mother represents what Doane calls "a fullness, a presence, a wholeness and harmony which must ultimately be broken" (Doane 1987, 77).

Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce*, as Pam Cook rightly observes, "re-present[s] the violent overthrow of the mother-right in favor of father-right." The murder scenario that the film, and not the novel, adds to the story effectively restructures Cain's melodrama into *noir*, the genre that returns the masculine observer, usually as detective, to the center of the plot (Cook 1998, 70). Even though the maternal melodrama remains in Mildred's flash-back testimony, it is entirely couched in Inspector Peterson's interrogation. Mildred's melodrama, made strictly correlative to her point of view, "is displaced," according to Cook, by a narrative frame "in which female discourse is suppressed but remains in the form of threatening shadows" (Cook 1998, 72). Haynes strips this central *noir* element from the film by eliminating low-key lighting and shadows, returning the film to melodrama, to the woman, to the person, in the manner of her very being as mother, whom *noir* eliminates from the child's reach.

Haynes is returning sex to Mildred, certainly, and to her daughter, Veda, but he is also returning the novel's maternal agony—the agony of confused bodies and fevered longing—to the center of the plot, a move that, perhaps surprisingly, can be characterized as more faithful to Mildred-as-repressed-genre-character than to Cain's version of her in his own novel (Hastie 2011, 32). The mother's over-investment of her desire in her child is now not only unmediated by a paternal narrative but is itself exposed as the "perverse subject of the oral drive" (Doane 1987, 83)—unconscious, fixated, libidinal, compensatory. The police investigation added in the 1945 version structurally insulates the spectator from this drive, from what women want, from the devouring maternal (and filial) *jouissance*. Haynes

offers no such protection from the drives of melodrama.

Far From Heaven and the Love Story

Just as Haynes's readaptation of *Mildred Pierce* has been critically perceived as both an adaptation of James Cain's novel and a rearticulation of 1980s feminist film theory (Hastie 2011, 27), his 2002 film *Far from Heaven* has, likewise, been viewed as both an homage to Douglas Sirk and as a tribute to feminist film theory, especially the feminist film theory associated with the reevaluation of Sirkian melodrama (Willis 2003, 134). Thus, Haynes's relation to Sirkian melodrama is not only conscious of film history but also mediated through the feminist criticism of Tania Modleski, Laura Mulvey, Annette Kuhn, and, of course, Mary Ann Doane.³

Critics have, in various ways, concluded that the repressed returns most often in the classical melodrama in the form of its often obvious artificiality, its lapses in realistic representation, and its overly mindful composition.⁴ In her evaluation of melodrama, for example, Mulvey argues that the true story of *All that Heaven Allows*,

³ Haynes's penchant for blending surface with what lies beneath is captured visually throughout the film when character costume almost seamlessly blends into the background. Notable scenes include Cathy being shown in the doctor's waiting room and when her friends' orange outfits blend into the autumnal foliage of the background. This blending of manifest and latent material appears most forcefully, and perhaps ironically, on the sidewalk outside the Ritz theater when Raymond utters his very impossible desire to "see beyond the surface of things," as Raymond's brown and gray checkered jacket blends closely with the theater's brown curtains and gold-framed windows and Cathy's gray-speckled coat seamlessly matches the concrete building pictured behind her.

⁴ See Elsaesser 1987, 52; Nowell-Smith 1977, 117; and Modleski 1984, 21.

Douglas Sirk's 1955 love story, is to be found in the lighting (Mulvey 2009, 44). The "social pressures" of the "historical milieu" are, says Sharon Willis, "repressed, marginalized, or 'euphemized'" in Sirk's films (Willis 2003, 135), leaving them ripe for elaboration, partly through evocations of Sirk's visual style, but partly through open allusion, as *Far from Heaven* borrows from *All that Heaven Allows*. Haynes does not merely cite Sirk in clever but empty post-modern nostalgia, however, merely promising "to show us what the 1950's viewers were not allowed to see" (Higgins 2007, 104); he appropriates, concatenates, and reassigns the repressions in Sirk's film. In *Far from Heaven*, Haynes introduces the issue of an inappropriate relationship between classes in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, for example, but then displaces it with the more harrowing situation of interracial love, borrowing and developing the critique of the social taboo that was only implied in Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959).⁵ In so doing, Haynes also moves Rock Hudson's difficulty with the conflict between his fame and his sexuality into Frank's struggle with his homosexuality in an era when such desire is taboo, because a woman's, not just a man's, desire has been strictly codified. To reparse Mulvey, "Rock Hudson," as icon, quantifies and contains a woman's desire: *this* is what women want. Haynes is not inventing a story of the 1950s; he is telling the story already buried in the period films themselves.

Haynes also returns to the repressed of Sirk by exaggerating in his film the methods by which the earlier director had

indicated the presence of material lurking below the surface narrative.⁶ While it is true that, as Willis observes, "*Far from Heaven* shares with these Sirk productions an obtrusive score, a meticulous attention to color, strikingly truncated interiors, and a rhythm of hysterical eruptions," Haynes seems to overstress these techniques and to add non-diegetic elements of his own—shot proxemics, rack and shallow focusing, camera movement and angles—in order to move his audiences through a waking, self-conscious regard for the act of filming itself (not unlike Quentin Tarantino's use of 1970s-style camera and sound work to draw readers into the craft, not just the narrative, of filmmaking).⁷ The opening shot from the film illustrates how Haynes cites his melodramatic antecedent not for nostalgia but for exhumation and analysis: a painting of autumnal leaves dissolves into actual autumnal leaves, a simple transition by which viewers of Sirk's film, working backward, may suddenly detect the hidden painted paper leaves hovering in the foreground of the opening aerial shot of *All That Heaven Allows*. The updated "leaves" are even more colorful than Sirk's originals, as if digitally enhanced, in subtle critique of the verisimilitude of Technicolor. Haynes's opening title credits appear even more mid-century in their style than Sirk's own less

⁶ Willis describes Haynes's style in *Far from Heaven* as "turning up the volume on Sirk" and as "exceeding Sirk's excesses." Willis 2003, 145.

⁷ Haynes uses editorial camera angles throughout the film: during the party when Eleanor confronts Cathy about Frank, after the party when Cathy confronts Frank about his behavior, when Cathy finally opens up to Eleanor about her true feelings toward Raymond, etc. Rack focusing and shallow focusing are used often in the film to show alienation between characters, mostly toward the end, when Cathy and Frank grow apart and when Cathy visits Raymond at his home.

⁵ Haynes, of course, also develops the film's exploration of interracial relations through Rainer Fassbinder's 1974 re-make of *All That Heaven Allows*, *Fear Eats the Soul*. See Salomé Skvirsky 2008.

distinct titles. And Elmer Bernstein's opening score in *Far from Heaven* is more heavy-handed and sweepingly dramatic than Frank Skinner's more subdued and neutrally-toned opening score in *All That Heaven Allows*. By exaggerating all the technical aspects of Sirk's film, Haynes turns Sirkian melodrama into lavish contrivance. It is impossible afterward to watch a Sirk melodrama without identifying the technical means by which emotional weight is pushed and pulled toward prescribed racial and sexual values, especially those that were centered on women.

In Doane's typology of the classical love story, the male lead "undergoes a kind of feminization by contamination," suggesting that, in order to be in a woman's film, the male character must be emasculated and brought in line with the narcissistic desires of the female spectator (Doane 1987, 97). The woman's film in general and the love story in particular rely to a large extent on a marketable feminine, narcissistically-framed fantasy to organize the desire of the central protagonist. Doane argues that, since "narcissism confounds the differentiation between subject and object," it "is one of the few psychical mechanisms Freud associates specifically with female desire" (Doane 1987, 32). Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* only hints at a critique of this convention by casting a closeted actor as the male lead.⁸ Haynes, of course, converts this quiet meta-parody of a woman's ("Cathy's") fantasy into a diegetic reality by making Frank a closeted character, thus undercutting the misogynist's premise that melodrama, as a genre, is structured to

satisfy a woman's narcissistic fantasy. Where does her narrative pleasure come from, in other words, if not anymore from the socially prescribed hope of conquering the male lead?

Through this method of traversing the fantastic support of the narrative and by making Raymond, Cathy's would-be lover, an impossible object, Haynes exposes the repressed drive underlying the fantastic premise of the love story. Perhaps, too, as Stephen Neale points out, "there is indeed an insistence in the *narrative* structure of many melodramas that mutual recognition, union through love, the attainment of the object of desire are impossible—because it is always too late" (Neale 1986, 22). The melodramatic failure in Cathy's and Raymond's relationship is the effect of a historically situated cause (race relations in 1950s America), and, as such, comes too early in cultural time, producing heartbreak in Haynes's film where it produced happiness for Sirk's. The audience's sorrow is not without pleasure, however, because it comes from recognition of what was lost to cultural time. History, like the filmmaking of the period, is implicated. Haynes's self-conscious invocations and revisions of Sirk tell the audience that the women in these films, as full "women," are ontologically themselves absent from the history on screen. Haynes reproduces, in a sort of meta-fictive space, a longing for the real women behind the false ones, a longing, as it were, for "a state of being prior to this fundamental separation and loss" (Neale 1986, 19). Because *Far from Heaven* seems to embrace itself as a remake, since it skillfully revolves around its lost origin, it already possesses the enjoyment of this painful longing at the level of form.

⁸ Rock Hudson apparently went through a similar coming out to his wife, Phyllis Gates, in the late 1950s, including the therapy sessions documented in *Far from Heaven*. See Galloway 2013.

Superstar and the Medical Discourse Film

Nearer the period from which Todd Haynes takes his feminist cues, the writer-director is less interested, it seems, in exposing the secrets of repression in a traditional woman's genre than he is in updating the genre to reflect the absence of the paternal anchor altogether. In fact, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1988) and *Safe* (1995) dramatize the psychic malaise of the post-modern borderline subject who is characterized by *inadequate* repression.⁹ Here Haynes creates two cinematic worlds in which there is little to be repressed. These woman's films – the medical-discourse film and the paranoiac narrative – present ontological quandaries that result from the annihilation of paternal authority.

As Doane presents the category, the classical medical-discourse woman's film (as if disavowing the nineteenth-century feminist literary tradition of vindicating sick and disaffected female characters) indissolubly connects "femininity and pathology" (Doane 1987, 38). Often the illness is psychical in nature (depression, amnesia, insanity), but, even when the illness appears essentially physical, it seems to function almost metaphorically for "an irrepressible and feverish desire" gone amok (Doane 1987, 39). In films like *Possessed* (1947), *Voyager* (1942), *Johnny Belinda* (1948), and *Lady in the Dark* (1944), the pathological is signified "by a marked lack of narcissism on the part of the sick woman," measured by her "undesirable appearance" (Doane 1987, 40-41). In other words, a woman is marked as *sick* if she is not sufficiently invested in desiring the man's own desiring gaze. Karen Carpenter's

anorexia nervosa is therefore an apt target for the medical-discourse film, because, in erasing the body, the young woman attempts to erase the male desire that socially defines her. And the presumed cure to such a loss of sufficient narcissism is to transform oneself once more in an object of desire.

In *Superstar*, however, the structure and order provided by that traditional male gaze—and Laura Mulvey has defined a career by demonstrating such structure and order at level of cinematic craft—have been called into doubt, giving rise to a competing order, which Todd McGowan designates as the "imaginary" (McGowan 2004, 59). In a modern society, which routinely relies on a televised "imaginary order," and in a nuclear family like the Carpenters, which was indebted to the feminine image produced within that visual space, Karen had little protection against this new imaginary reality. She floated without firm symbolic reference from the order of the male gaze, and yet she was strangled by a medium in which a woman's body must shrink, not gesture voluptuously, for the camera. The hetero-normative gaze defined by classical Hollywood was in the process of being suspended by the cinematic practices and the feminist cultural practices of the 1970s.¹⁰

Several critics take this line of argument, maintaining that, according to Haynes's biopic, Karen Carpenter was attempting to live the image of the ideal feminine that proliferated in the entertainment industry. Indeed, at one point in the film when Karen and Mrs. Carpenter

⁹ For a discussion of "borderline" as a new, contemporary psychic disorder, see Kristeva.

¹⁰ Haynes therefore presents in his film what might be called a "critique of heteronormativity and the formal structures which make its mythology appear natural" (Burdette 1998, 79).

are arguing about Karen's obsession with her weight, Mrs. Carpenter dismisses her daughter's growing fixation by saying, "You just concentrate on your career." Karen retorts, "That's what I am doing, but you gotta look good in my career," whereby "good" means waifish. But, of course, Karen's refusal to eat can also be understood as a form of unconscious protest against the very image promoted by the entertainment industry, and this might explain the rather ambivalent tone of the film. Immediately after this intimate argument between Karen and her mother, filmed primarily in medium-distance one and two shots, Haynes cuts to a long shot with Richard entering the room from the right with the supposedly great news that Jack is taking them "out for a huge celebration dinner" in Karen's honor. Haynes then swish pans to a close-up shot of Karen, showing her fear and disgust, before punctuating the scene with the recurring image of a live-action plate of food. On the manifest level, Karen is obviously worried about dining out at the all-you-can-eat smorgasbord, but on the latent level, because this dinner is directly associated with her career in the entertainment industry, she appears equally worried about herself being served up for the enjoyment of the Other. In other words, Karen's self-starvation, as this scene implies, figures as a symbolic rebellion against a cannibalistic industry and the social system it creates. Serving up less of oneself physically is both a formal necessity, in a medium that notoriously adds ten or twenty pounds visually to a woman, and an existential threat, because television, unlike cinema, is an all-you-can-eat medium.

At a time when glam rock was all the rage and male vocalists were transforming themselves into lithe feminine caricatures

through the androgynous aesthetics of the scene—in a gesture that now reveals, perhaps, the cinematic retrenchment of masculinity and the appropriation of feminine body tropes—Karen Carpenter, worlds away from the glam-rock movement, was effectively transforming herself into an adolescent boy. Glam rock was embracing pansexuality; Karen was denying sexuality altogether.¹¹ Massimo Recalcati argues that with the anorexic subject "an absolute rejection takes over the semblance of femininity," resistance to one's "degradation to a partial object of the phallic *jouissance* of the Other" (Recalcati 2005, 86). But the subject protests not toward greater self-presence but toward self-absence, toward the nothingness that lies behind the mass-market image of femininity: "the monstrous body seems to prefer to evoke what is concealed under the feminine masquerade" (Recalcati 2005, 86), and the "what" is empty being. Haynes aptly uses The Carpenter's song "Masquerade" as non-diegetic source music during the montage sequence, showing the quick dissolution of Karen's brief marriage and punctuating it with a shot of a femme fatale from the classical cinema era in order to evoke the traditional image of the woman who would attempt to subvert masculine *jouissance*.



¹¹ The pansexuality of 70s glam rock is, of course, the subject of Haynes's 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*.

There is no presence behind the Barbie dolls Haynes uses to criticize the imaginary world of both the entertainment industry and contemporary consumer culture. Unmoored from the structure of paternal culture, Karen, like the entertainment industry and contemporary American culture, is skin and bones without an interior life to cling to, however fraught it might have been as a function of that older order. Life inside the TV is, in the most predictable but necessary critique of Hollywood, a series of surfaces without depth, a hall of mirrors that might best be described as “post-Oedipal.”¹²

Safe and the Paranoia Film

With *Safe*, Haynes reworks many of the standard elements from the woman’s paranoia film, in which the central character must navigate the uncertain waters of a relationship in order to confirm its validity. Appropriately, then, the character Carol White is a second wife, the typically belated figure who comes to desire after the first wife’s desire has been played out as a

master discourse. It is a setup dramatized in such classics as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940), Fritz Lang’s *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), and Peter Godfrey’s *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947). Haynes shifts the woman’s sense of suffocation, however, to the social space as a whole. In the classical paranoia film, the second wife has to contend with the issue of what made the (usually mysterious) first wife desirable. Is the man’s longing trapped in the image of the prior woman? Will that unsatisfied longing manifest itself as hatred or violence toward the new wife? In *Safe*, however, Carol seems less haunted by the other wife’s residual presence in her husband than by the animus of the world at large. Consistent with a post-modern subjectivity brought about by a shrinking symbolic order and the collapse of repression, Carol’s suspicion does not stem from something harmful her husband, a solitary figure of culturally-defeated masculinity, might do to her but, rather, from something sinister the world might inflict upon her. In the classical paranoia woman’s film, the fear of the wrathful new husband is, in the feminist psychoanalytical terms that Haynes has implicitly adopted, “a cover for a more intense fear concerning the maternal figure and the annihilation of subjectivity” (Doane 1987, 145). Counterintuitively, that is, a woman’s fear of the husband is actually a primal fear of the smothering *mother*. And so Haynes turns the maternal figure into the largest feminine presence possible—mother nature—as indicated by Carol’s mysterious environmental illness.

Doane also argues that in the classical woman’s paranoia film the supposedly properly feminine space of the home becomes disturbed by an unrelenting exterior. This persistent outside threat, in turn, leads the home, the seat of

¹² Jacques Lacan theorizes the beyond of Oedipus and the waning of the power of the paternal metaphor in Seminar XVII. Lacan 2007, 87-142. For a thorough analysis of the post-Oedipal cultural shift, see Žižek 1999, 313-99; Copjec 1994, 163-99; Verhaeghe 1999; and McGowan 2004. The contemporary post-Oedipal era emerges as traditional society, centered on prohibition and grounded in the Name of the Father and paternal authority, erodes by the over-commodification of cultural value. Thus, we find ourselves living in what psychoanalytic cultural critics refer to as a “post-Oedipal” context, in which the Name-of-the-Father that functions as the organizing principle and the basic cornerstone of traditional symbolic exchange has been cast aside. Primal Fathers and Maternal Things displace the traditional authority and legal anchor that is (was) the Symbolic Father that both Freud and Lacan assume, for better or worse, as the foundation of cultural exchange and civilized society.

domesticity, to acquire an uncanny aura. The environment is attacking Carol from the most intimate to the most public spaces she inhabits. Detached from the ontological and sexual assumptions of the traditional medical-discourse genre, Carol has no safe spaces in which to perform an identity. In the context of a functioning “Oedipal” framework, a symbolic order—generated by clear hierarchies and partitioned rituals of gender performance—creates the distance necessary for social relations. Western paternal/symbolic order allows us, for example, to tolerate strangers within our personal space on a busy public commuter line (or in a crowded locker room) “because the symbol has the effect of eliminating enjoyment and carving out a neutral space in which subjects can interact,” explains McGowan; “I do not experience the other’s enjoyment encroaching on me, as I would if I didn’t have an experience of the symbolic pact governing the interaction” (McGowan 2004, 22). Knowing your place—knowing where spheres of pleasure and pain stop and start—means knowing where you stand, literally and figuratively, in relation to all the variables of social identity. But what if those variables have lost their order? What if a woman opens a door for a man, and neither one is sure just yet what that otherwise innocuous gesture means? Multiply that environmental uncertainty by the millions of gestures that shape social identity, and it becomes clear that individual spaces, however small, no longer seem protected. With the rise of a media-consumer society, the shrinking of public space, and the fading of the symbolic organizational pact that occurs in the post-Oedipal era, symbolic protections weaken. Paranoia proliferates. McGowan goes so far as to insist that the white flight to the suburbs indicates, in general, a racially-inflected search for

“enjoyment” in the absence of traditional order: “we try to move further and further apart in an effort to gain respite from the other’s enjoyment that only the experience of the symbolic structure could actually provide” (McGowan, 2004, 23).

Nearly ten years earlier, Haynes captured (and anticipated) this very critique in *Safe*, merging racial and class topographies with the anxiety of locating oneself after an intangible but pervasive—if also repressive—social order has collapsed. Carol has married into the “White” family, and she and her husband have isolated themselves up in the hills of suburbia in a house surrounded by a metal fence and protected by the neighborhood’s own private security guards. When the blue-collar workers deliver the White’s new sofa, Carol asks them to use the side entrance. The school report that Carol’s stepson, Rory, reads at the dinner table one night centers on the fear of increased criminal activity growing in the San Fernando Valley: “Today Black and Chicano gangs are coming into the Valley, in mostly white areas more and more.” The “horrific” mistaken black couch that enters Carol’s house and her obsessive milk consumption literalize her fear of racial intrusion and dislocation. When Carol has her first coughing fit, it is caused by a working-class dump truck that she finds herself trapped behind one day in traffic.¹³ The very noise of the truck brings “terror and contamination” (Pomerance 2007, 85). And automobile traffic itself contributes to the post-Oedipal social contraction of safe space, even as each occupant of a vehicle imagines, often rather desperately, that

¹³ It is a similar delivery truck that fumigates Carol later at the Wrenwood Center one day when she meanders too closely to the roadway adjacent to the Center’s grounds.

one's car, no matter how close it might be to others on the road, offers an inviolable sphere. Carol is aptly pictured rolling up the windows of her Mercedes.

Even Carol's language seems to fall apart and lose its referential and spatial bearings. During the visit to the psychiatrist, for example, when asked by the doctor if she works, Carol at first begins to say no, that she is a housewife, only to catch herself midway through the unofficially archaic term and instead says "homemaker"—a term that comes from the "new paradigm" of which the "Deep Ecology" infomercial speaks. She even asks her husband in all terrified seriousness one day while in bed, "Where am I, right now?" Ultimately, Carol feels the need to relocate to the New-Age Wrenwood Center in New Mexico for further protection from the onslaught of "enjoyment" that her San Fernando Valley suburb no longer adequately keeps at bay. But during what can be described as her post-linguistic birthday speech one night at the center, Carol struggles with the terminology, concepts, and jargon that the center provides their clients to articulate their mysterious illness. Throughout the film, she cannot speak ably and confidently in public spaces, and in this late scene when she actually attempts a small public speech, she delivers them without any sense of inhabiting the verbal space they might create for her.¹⁴ Symbolic orders are easily dropped, let alone exchanged. She has joined this cult in the hopes of building a new symbolic space, only to find that the

Other—in the form of the Wrenwood Center's propagandistic discourse—cannot be assimilated without erasing her anew. The cult-like atmosphere comes with its own set of explicit prohibitions, as a means of warding off enjoyment, but even while in the supposed safety of the center, tucked away in the desert of the Southwest, Carol cannot partition the competing forms and figures of "enjoyment" around her. She remains in self-enclosed isolation in the porcelain-lined, womb-like igloo. The final, open-ended shot of the film is Carol's mirror reflection reverse shot, signifying her feeble attempt to re-enter the Lacanian mirror stage and build an imaginary register that would structure pleasure within a stable symbolic order.

In her own critical interpretation, Doane has argued that film theory "has insistently linked the cinema with the register of the imaginary" (Doane 1987, 128). As a theoretically engaged filmmaker, Haynes puts this critical understanding to work throughout his post-classical mirroring of the classical woman's film. And in the final shot from *Safe*, Haynes brings to a literal climax the ordeal of a woman caught within—and outside—a set of genres that have consistently miscalculated her.

Works Cited

- Burdette, K. "Queer Readings/Queer Cinema: An Examination of the Early Works of Todd Haynes." *The Velvet Light Trap* 41 (1998): 79.
- Cain, James M. *Mildred Pierce*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Cook, Pam. "Duplicity in Mildred Pierce." *Women in Film Noir: New Edition*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: BFI, 1998. 69-80.
- Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge: MIT, 1994.

¹⁴ Earlier in the film, during one of the group therapy sessions at the Wrenwood Center, Carol references her childhood bedroom with its "yellow wallpaper," an indirect reference to the famous Charlotte Perkins Gilman short story about an isolated woman's shrinking symbolic order and resulting onset of paranoia.

- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987.
- . "Pathos and Pathology: The Cinema of Todd Haynes." *Camera Obscura* 19.3 (2004): 1-21.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama."
- Galloway, Stephen. "Rock Hudson's Wife Secretly Recorded his Gay Confession." *The Hollywood Reporter*. n.p., 6 June 2013. Web. 6 June 2013.
- Gledhill, Christine, ed. *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. London: BFI, 1987. 43-69.
- Hastie, Amelia. "Sundays with Mildred." *Film Quarterly* 65.1 (2011): 25-33.
- Higgins, Scott. "Orange and Blue, Desire and Loss: The Colour Score in *Far from Heaven*." Morrison 101-13.
- Kristeva, Julia. *New Maladies of the Soul*. Trans. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia, 1997.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Book XVII*. Trans. Russell Grigg. New York: Norton, 2007.
- Mac Donald, Scott. "From Underground to Multiplex: An Interview with Todd Haynes." *Film Quarterly* 62.3 (2009): 54-64.
- McGowan, Todd. *The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment*. Albany: SUNY, 2004.
- Modleski, Tania. "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film." *Cinema Journal* 23.3 (1984): 19-30.
- Morrison, James, ed. *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows*. London: Wallflower, 2007.
- . "Todd Haynes in Theory and Practice." Morrison 132-144.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama." *Movie* 25 (1977): 53-6.
- . *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd Edition. New York: Palgrave, 2009.
- Neale, Stephen. "Douglas Sirk." *Framework* 5 (1977): 16-18.
- . "Melodrama and Tears." *Screen* 27.6 (1986): 6-23.
- Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. "Minnelli and Melodrama." *Screen* 18.2 (1977): 113-18.
- Pomerance, Murray. "Safe in Lotosland." Morrison 79-87.
- Recalcati, Massimo. "The Anorexic Passion for the Mirror," trans. Jorge Jauregui. *Lacanian Ink* 24 (2005): 75-91.
- Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as a Masquerade." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303-313.
- Schwarz, Benjamin. "Hard-Boiled." *The Atlantic* 307.4 (2011): 85-90.
- Skvirsky, Salomé Aguilera. "The Price of Heaven: Remaking Politics in *All that Heaven Allows*, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, and *Far from Heaven*." *Cinema Journal* 47.3 (2008): 90-121.
- Verhaeghe, Paul. *Love in a Time of Loneliness: Three Essays on Drive and Desire*. New York: Other, 1999.
- Willis, Sharon. "The Politics of Disappointment: Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk." *Camera Obscura* 18.3 (2003): 131-75.
- Wyatt, Justin. "Cinematic/Sexual Transgression: An Interview with Todd Haynes." *Film Quarterly* 46.3 (1993): 2-8.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999.