

INTRODUCTION

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Among the most audacious filmmakers in modern cinema, Todd Haynes has built an original style out of simulation – intricately mannered yet emotionally immediate – and it is now one of the most suggestive styles in American movies. Haynes’ work is indispensable in considering some of the most pressing questions of contemporary culture: in an age of consumerism, what is the proper social role of art – especially the art of film, that quintessential hotbed of mass production and commodity fetishism? After its wholesale commodification in the twentieth century, can art sustain the expression of critical attitudes, a pursuit that some have called its most essential function? And, at a time when even the concept of authenticity is under siege, can the artist, especially if the artist is a filmmaker, hope to achieve or work from any viable position of originality, or is originality itself simply another myth of the modernist imagination that postmodern art itself has done so much in recent decades to demystify?

As a filmmaker who conceives his work with a keen awareness of the theoretical issues surrounding cultural production, Haynes approaches these issues from a decidedly postmodern perspective, and this very facet of his artistic identity is perhaps the dimension of his work that makes it such a crucial test-case for an understanding of contemporary film. Artists of Andy Warhol’s generation challenged the possibility or usefulness of art as social critique by appropriating received aesthetic or cultural images detached from their historical origins – Warhol’s silk screens of stars or prolif-

erating images of commodities, Rauschenberg's recycling of comic book iconographies, Rosenquist's pastiches of political images – undermining the traditional idea that the 'highest' art *reflects* the historical conditions on which it depends. In doing so, they often found themselves broaching a corollary idea, perhaps even more traditional: that the highest art *transcends* these historical conditions, the influence of which it thereby escapes.

Art of the generations after Warhol often attempted to escape this bind by rethinking the given relations between art and society, originality and simulation, and this re-conception has been formulated, perhaps, nowhere more persuasively than in American independent cinema of the last thirty years. An art built on pastiche, on the concerted assemblage of reference, allusion, free-form parody and floating signifiers, this cinema feeds on the Hollywood tradition as ravidly as it does on a host of other forms and styles – the European art-film, punk, grunge, glam, camp, cult, the cultural underground and the putative mainstream, pop art and pulp fiction – while making a show of casually discarding, or holding in gleeful contempt, the basic premises of the Hollywood model. Yet while this movement, if tendencies so tonally various and formally diffuse can be called a 'movement', could be said to have realised Warhol's ambition to achieve an art with no original, it also seems to have reenergised, if not realised, Warhol's parallel fantasy of a culture without limits, where high trades places with low, and the underground becomes the mainstream. Considered in tandem with the work of, say, Gus Van Sant or Jim Jarmusch, David Lynch or Kathryn Bigelow, the Coen Brothers or Steven Soderbergh, the films of Todd Haynes tell us more about this dynamic than we can learn just about anywhere else.

Though hardly typical, Haynes' career remains a remarkably evocative gauge of these larger trends, while retaining great artistic interest in its own right. His first film was *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a disease-of-the-week-movie parody that tells the story of Karen Carpenter's anorexia, with Barbie and Ken dolls playing all the characters in miniature sets. It begins as brazen mockery, but as its understanding of the social and cultural constructions of Karen's illness widens, it takes on a bitter poignancy. By the end, the feckless, slipshod close-ups of the expressionless dolls become heartbreaking, as we begin to see their superficially whimsical embodiments as a comment on the characters' terrible vulnerabilities. His next film, *Poison* (1991), is a complex trilogy that emerged as one of the defining works of the 'New Queer Cinema'. One of the tales imitates a true-crime TV report, another a 1950s horror movie, and the third the works of Jean Genet. Intercutting between these styles with a halting and restless daring, the movie discovers a new relation between imitation, parody and pastiche that buoys its themes of abjection, reprisal and guilt.

This trilogy was already working against the irony of its own styles, so it is not surprising that Haynes' subsequent film, *Safe* (1995), puzzled many viewers with its story of a Southern California housewife (played by Julianne Moore) equally afflicted by environmental sickness and the 'New Age' therapies that are the only palliatives available for her disease. Though the film is as highly regarded as any

American independent movie of the 1990s, many critics initially wanted it to be clearer in its satirical attitudes towards either the illness or the remedy. But the question the movie is asking is a much more piercing one: especially in the age of AIDS, if illness itself is subject to cultural construction, then how can any cure be trusted – or faulted?

Haynes' subsequent film, *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), is a reconstruction of glam-rock cultural styles of the 1970s with kinetic reverberations of the films of Ken Russell, Derek Jarman or Nicolas Roeg. The film affords bleak glimpses of Reagan's America in 1984, but mostly, it presents a kaleidoscopic fantasia of an age just *before* AIDS. Yet the allegorical qualities of Haynes' films always seem intent on expressing the difficulty of pursuing gay themes and styles – and an unwillingness to pursue them in the given terms – especially at a time when enlightened people commonly assume that gays have already achieved their liberations.

Haynes' most recent film, the remarkable *Far from Heaven* (2002), tells the story of Cathy, an upper-class housewife (again played by Julianne Moore) in a posh Connecticut suburb in the 1950s who, early in the film, discovers her husband in the arms of another man. She is shocked, but not to the extent we might have expected. The hidebound world she inhabits is so cloistered, so insular, one could fully believe that it might never occur to the people who live in such a place that there should be men who desire each other sexually. In fact they all know it – and many other things they would rather not know – but their safety from challenge depends on an atmosphere of repression fomented by the pretence that they do not.

Not for the first time in Haynes' work, repression is the subject of the movie, but it is not treated in ordinary terms, as a covert system of constraint. In this movie everything is right out in the open, and visible in every quarter – the hypocrisy, the racism, the class conflict, the intense desires the characters still feel amid these inhibiting forces. Above all, the movie is about homophobia, and it adopts a mode of fervent high-camp to keep that subject central even while it is relatively peripheral in the plot.

The style of the film simulates that of a 1950s movie soap opera. Specifically, it mimics the look, feel and some of the iconography of a handful of melodramas Douglas Sirk made in Hollywood during this period – especially *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). In one respect this connection should not be overstated. The film draws on a large fund of references, not just Sirk, for its evocation of the era, from the stories of John Cheever or books like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) or *The Organization Man* (1956), to other movies of the time like Max Ophüls' *The Reckless Moment* (1949) (recently remade as *The Deep End* (2001)) and the film version of *Peyton Place* (1957).

In another quite specialised sense, though, the Sirk connection *cannot* be overstated. Sirk's movies were all about the relation of repression to desire, and they forged a very recognisable visual style to convey this theme. Their distinctive looks were all blue-grey glaze – Sirk shot with special lenses to emphasise the icy surfaces of his compositions – with delirious splashes of primary colour to suggest the feverish

emotions being squelched in the stories. Their expressionist tendencies were invisible to critics of the day, who largely dismissed them as banal 'women's pictures'. Only later were Sirk's movies reevaluated as complex works that brought a powerful strain of Brechtian irony to Hollywood genre filmmaking. Yet the films' heated, sardonic modernism was never really invisible; it was simply not seen.

That is the main concern of *Far from Heaven*: the relation of the visible to the unseen. The adaptation of Sirk's style works on at least three levels. First, it makes us aware that the version of 1950s America we are seeing here is one that has been filtered through cultural references rather than being reconstructed in some 'direct' way. Second, in the meticulous emulation of its sources, it animates the camp sensibility of the film with a current of epicurean rapture. And third, it infuses the movie with a depth of emotion, since the film expresses an intense love of the kinds of films it is modelled on that, despite a certain indifference to traditional verisimilitude, translates into an extraordinary feeling for time, place and character.

The relation in *Far from Heaven* between the film's relatively marginal gay theme and its overweening gay sensibility illustrates this point forcefully. The most bitter irony in the film is that Cathy's husband Frank (Dennis Quaid) is able to find a form of happiness in a gay relationship while Cathy's subsequent, tentative flirtation with her gardener Raymond (Dennis Haysbert), who is black, is prohibited emphatically. On the one hand, this theme rightly connects the social and historical oppression of women, blacks and gays. On the other, it raises questions at least as complex as those of *Safe*, even if most viewers will find the tone far less baffling. The heterosexual relation between Cathy and Raymond is vilified because it is visible, while the clandestine relation between Frank and his lover is possible only because it is not. Which is better?

Though the film refrains from providing explicit answers, the implied answer remains clear: neither, of course. Both possibilities are more than thinkable within the community that legislates them. In fact, it is clear that a community thinks about and imagines little else than what it wants to disappear, but the tragic sense of the film, ardent and tender, presents Cathy's romance as the ultimate Hollywood cliché that can still bring us to tears, while showing the pseudo-triumph of the husband's sexuality as an ironic victory in the extent to which, by the end of the film, it has been almost completely absented. In its purest form, camp is the retrograde aesthetic style of a self-consciously closeted gay sensibility, and Haynes adopts it wholeheartedly to suggest that the destiny of the closet is by no means a thing of the past.

The filtering of this imaginary 1950s through a very contemporary sensibility makes much the same point, and the mainstream success of *Far from Heaven* bears important implications for the issues raised above concerning the place of film in postmodern art, culture and society. It also makes a volume such as this on the films of Todd Haynes both timely and necessary, and the fourteen essays of this anthology, taken together, provide a comprehensive analysis of his films in depth, as well as a theoretical context in which to think about them. Each of Haynes' films – including his little-seen student film *Assassins: A Film about Rimbaud* (1985) – is discussed from several perspectives, and his work as a whole is examined against the background of

contemporary film, history, culture and society. A portrait of Haynes' work emerges that is both consistent and remarkably varied.

In the first essay, 'Storytelling and Information in Todd Haynes' Films', Marcia Landy surveys Haynes' films as self-conscious meditations on the problem of storytelling in an information age. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's well-known essay 'The Storyteller', Landy considers what Haynes' work has to tell us about shifting relationships in contemporary art and media between style and substance, image and reality. This contribution initiates the anthology with a full overview that considers each of Haynes' films, while the subsequent essay by Joan Hawkins, 'Now is the Time of the Assassins', returns to the director's days as a student filmmaker, showing how his 1985 film *Assassins* prefigures important themes in the work to come as well as achieving impressive artistic effects in its own right.

In the next essay, 'To Appear, to Disappear: Jean Genet and *Poison*', Sam Ishii-Gonzales examines sources of that film in Genet's work. Ishii-Gonzales is particularly concerned with the nature of Haynes' film as pastiche – with how content 'is revealed through the fissures in the text, the discontinuities, the deformations of cinematic form'. This essay is followed by two pieces on queer childhood, Lucas Hilderbrand's 'Mediating Queer Boyhood: *Dottie Gets Spanked*' and Jon Davies' 'Nurtured in Darkness: Queer Childhood in the Films of Todd Haynes'. Hilderbrand's essay shows how *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993) 'provides a textual example of the central role television spectatorship can play in children's sexual identity production', while Davies extends this enquiry to the cultural realms of 'theatre, spectacle, art, glam rock, dandy style, elaborate kink and above all, stories, dreams and imaginings' to illustrate how children in Haynes' films achieve forms of 'queer citizenship'.

The two essays following stake out different positions on *Safe*. In 'Allegory, *mise-en-scène*, AIDS: Interpreting *Safe*', John David Rhodes considers the representation of AIDS in Haynes' film as a form of allegorical double-consciousness. In '*Safe* in Lotosland', Murray Pomerance provides a vivid and compelling evocation of the film's highly formalised depiction of Southern California as cultural critique before concluding that Haynes' representation shares some of the complacency it appears to satirise. In Nick Davis' "'The Invention of a People": *Velvet Goldmine* and the Unburying of Queer Desire', meanwhile, the author draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze, especially his comments on the time-image and the figure of the 'minority' filmmaker, to argue that *Velvet Goldmine* articulates a 'means of collective utterance' for its characters' queer identities.

Three subsequent essays deal with *Far from Heaven* from differing perspectives. In 'Orange and Blue, Desire and Loss: The Colour Score in *Far from Heaven*', Scott Higgins places the film in the tradition of the colour melodrama. Todd McGowan, in 'Relocating Our Enjoyment of the 1950s: The Politics of Fantasy in *Far from Heaven*', discusses the film's evocation of that oft-portrayed era as a critique of conservative nostalgia. Finally, Celeste-Marie Bernier focuses on the film's representations of modern art in the context of their subtending discourses of primitivism in "'Beyond the Surface of Things": Race, Representation and the Fine Arts in *Far from Heaven*'.

My own essay, 'Todd Haynes in Theory and Practice', traces specific influences of contemporary critical theory on the director's filmmaking, especially through the vehicle of the postmodern melodrama. Anat Pick also takes up the role of melodrama in Haynes' work, contending in 'Todd Haynes' Melodramas of Abstraction' that he uses the affective framework of melodrama to explore disembodiment, abstraction and, in turn, the gender relations of which these are symptoms. The collection concludes with Alexandra Juhasz's 'From the Scenes of Queens: Genre, AIDS and Queer Love', an essay that poignantly mixes memoir and cultural analysis to provide a final look at Haynes' work as a whole against the backdrop of AIDS activism and queer cultures of the 1980s and 1990s.

This book traces the evolution of Haynes's career to a crucial point, as *Far from Heaven* marks a key turning point in the filmmaker's work. To call it his "break-through" film is to accept the spurious terms of corporate marketing, but it remains the first of the director's films to make its way to the cineplexes, raising the question of what forms Haynes's work will take following this degree of commercial success. Though the last decade of American film has blurred the boundary between independent and industry cinema – a development that enabled, in part, the making of Haynes's last three features to date – it is not at all clear that the putative mainstream will support an artist of his predilections. Directors like Steven Soderbergh or Richard Linklater move easily from mainstream to nominally independent filmmaking – from *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) to *Full Frontal* (2002) or *Bubble* (2006) in Soderbergh's case, from *Waking Life* (2001) to *School of Rock* (2003) in Linklater's – but neither has anything like Haynes's defining allegiances to avant-garde traditions or outsider affiliations. In cases like those of David Lynch or Gus Van Sant, both have been accused of abdicating their deepest and most characteristic postures or impulses in projects like *Dune* (1984) or *The Straight Story* (1999) for Lynch, *Good Will Hunting* (1997) or *Finding Forrester* (2000) for Van Sant. As another paragon of New Queer Cinema, Van Sant is an especially significant figure for comparison, since his flirtations with the mainstream have involved, at least superficially, a near-total abandonment of his work's queer dimensions.

Haynes's career so far, at its still relatively early stage, has achieved such theoretical and artistic coherence that any such departure would inevitably be felt as a severe rupture. Some sense of this perhaps motivated Haynes, reportedly, to decline an offer to film an adaptation of a book by Wally Lamb (*She's Come Undone*), whose low-camp confections are dependably selected for Oprah Winfrey's book club. As this volume goes to press, Haynes's follow-up to *Far from Heaven* is in production, a meditation on the cultural legacy of Bob Dylan with the enticing working title *I'm Not There: Suppositions on a Film Concerning Dylan*. The fey self-consciousness of this title points back to that of Haynes' early film on Rimbaud, and the reported conceit of casting as Dylan multiple actors, including women, foretells the endurance of the filmmaker's familiar critique of humanist notions of coherent selfhood, offering hope to those who expect that Haynes will continue his work in the cinema of transgression. For those with an eye on the box-office, it is heartening to note that the multiple-casting idea has already generated plenty of press as a deliciously outrageous ploy, while attracting a

scintillating lineup of stars. Taken together, these circumstances portend that Haynes may well achieve what no American director has really yet accomplished: to bring a cinema of transgression fully into the mainstream. But whether Haynes's career pursues its established styles and themes or follows new and unpredictable turns, what is clear, as this book shows, is that his achievement so far is remarkable.