

Todd Haynes

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b. January 2, 1961, Los Angeles, California, USA.

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Threes are key to understanding Todd Haynes' cinema. As of this writing, his body of work consists of two movements of threes – three shorts, three features. The two movements overlap each other, the final short, *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1994), coming in-between Haynes' first and second features, *Poison* (1991) and *Safe* (1995). On the outskirts, in the far past, lie *Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud* (1985) and *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987). In the more recent past is Haynes' glam-rock feature *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). Six movies in total, with seventh, *Far From Heaven* (2002), on the way. It's a smaller output than most of the great directors, but cinema has never been solely about quantity, and Haynes' meticulously planned and executed cinema is of such high quality that each film is worth analysis and consideration.

The overlap in Haynes' narrative storytelling, between the shorts and features, is akin to the experiences his movies provide. I can think of no clearer illustration of this than an opening sequence of *Poison* wherein the character John Broom (Scott Renderer), imprisoned for homosexual acts, is asked bluntly about the term that supposedly defines him. "Is that written as two words?" a clearly discomfited guard questions as he points to the hand-scrawled *homosexual* on the prison admittance form. Look closely and you can see the guard's finger bisecting the word into *homo sexual*. Divided, the two words stand on their own as concrete categories. Joined together it's a likewise definable term. Yet there's the matter of that empty, bottomless space in-between, the gray area that people and their natures are subject to, but rarely address. The third category. The ineffable.



Haynes addresses the ineffable. He goes out of his way to make us aware of that bottomless space beneath the categories, sexual and otherwise. As in Yeats, the center does not hold – Haynes' stories, his characters, his visual palette, every single element of his movies coalesce to give a sense of the anarchy loosed within his characters, regardless of the emotional repression they necessarily experience at the dictates of the movies' structures. The people in a Haynes film move less on straight lines than in endless concentric circles, their internal states forever affected by their environments and other external stimuli, for better, for worse.

From Haynes' movies, in addition to his own writings and interviews given, one gets a sense of a well-educated man with an imposing vernacular. The academic nature of his conversation comes across doubly so in the structure of his movies, where characters, dialogue and cultural references, camera movement, etc, comment on the action as in an essay. One can nearly sense the indentations between paragraphs. It's a very literary experience, a cinema where you feel (or read) through the ideas, as opposed to the more commonplace occurrence where viewer passivity is the order of the day. I must therefore state bluntly that Haynes' movies are not for everyone. I recall New York movie critic Armond White dismissing *Velvet Goldmine* as "a desiccated thesis-film," and I can't help but think that the didactic nature of Haynes' work, something I personally find tremendously engaging, will turn off those who believe cinema to be, at its purest level, a wholly visceral experience.

No doubt Haynes' method comes somewhat from his education at Brown University, where he graduated in 1985 with a Bachelor of the Arts degree in Art and Semiotics. That same year he moved to New York and launched Apparatus Productions whose aim was the support of independent film. Already he had made the first of his shorts, *Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud*. The film is not available for rental as far as I'm aware, but I was able to view it at Haynes' 1998 American Museum of the Moving Image retrospective. Certainly this is a rough work, amateurish in certain aesthetic and technical respects, yet Haynes' confidence in his storytelling and subject comes across so strongly that the shortcomings become part of the charm. Already the academicism is in place. The first shot is of an actor being made up as Arthur Rimbaud and relating his impressions of the infamous poet. This takes place in front of a white backdrop with disembodied hands applying the makeup from off-screen. The acknowledgment of artifice helps ease us into the story of the violent love affair between Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. Haynes casts both roles with actors of the same youthful appearance, even though Verlaine was quite older than Rimbaud. Plus Haynes has the actor playing Verlaine wear an obviously fake beard that does little to disguise the adolescent voice and gait. To an extent, this can be attributed to the usual vagaries of student film production, but it also feels for the most part, quite right. As a result, the nature of the Rimbaud/Verlaine relationship becomes adolescent and vampire-like, each character trying to suck the life, and the art, out of the other. *Assassins* is also a smorgasbord of anachronisms – an absinthe bar plays Iggy Pop's "Nightclubbing," Rimbaud spray-paints graffiti on walls – so much so that the essences of the characters take to the fore and subsume any need for realism. Indeed, realism is not what Haynes is after in any of his movies. The following exchange of dialogue in *Velvet Goldmine* perhaps expresses one of Haynes' cinematic beliefs, and also describes the ultimate experience of *Assassins*, "...we prefer impressions to ideas – brief flights to sustained ones – exceptions to types – situations to subjects – and yourself?"



That last question is important in Haynes' cinema, for his movies always make us consciously aware of our beliefs and then challenge us to rethink them and consider others. *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* does as much and more, and it's a shame that it can only be seen through bootleg video, blocked from distribution by Karen Carpenter's family. One can understand why, because the film is a distressing examination of public versus private personas. For the most part, the film is shot with Barbie dolls playing the roles of the ill-fated '70s singer and her family. This is a perfect choice, because the mass influence of Barbie dolls in a young person's life cannot be denied. They stress an ideal of beauty that, in most subtle ways, engrains itself in a young person's mind. Haynes is not criticizing the dolls themselves so much as presenting the ideal beauty that they support and showing how naïve adherence to such a mindset can drive certain among us on a hellish downward slope. Using a popular entertainer as the central character further imbues the story with tragedy, for it plays on the false innocence that the media builds up around its celebrities and exposes the humanity beneath. Using the cheeriness of the Carpenters' songs as juxtaposition, Haynes also relates the confusion of an era – video images of Nixon in office and the Vietnam conflict add political resonance, while reflective tracking shots of a suburban neighborhood remind us that there are stories behind each and every door. Karen's is merely one in several billion.



In Haynes' next film, *Poison*, the theme of threes is most evident. This is a triptych narrative, inspired by writings of Jean Genet (*Miracle of the Rose*, *Our Lady of the Flowers* and *Thief's Journal*). The three stories are intercut so that each comments on the other. The "Hero" segment focuses, in television expose style, on a young boy who kills his abusive father and flies out the window of his suburban home. The "Horror" segment is a spoof on '50s horror films and their paranoia, wherein scientist Dr. Graves (Larry Maxwell) isolates the sex drive, accidentally ingests it, and becomes a deformed monster. The "Homo" segment is about the erotic bond between two children in a borstal and then as men (Scott Renderer and James Lyons) in Fontanel prison several years later. Watching the film again recently, I was most struck by two things. First, how this film and Haynes' others often assume the observant point-of-view of children. We can trace this back to the obviously adolescent Verlaine in *Assassins* and the iconic use of Barbie dolls in *Superstar*, not to mention certain imagery in the later films, from *Dottie Gets Spanked* through to *Velvet Goldmine*. More on this when we discuss the later movies. Second, *Poison* seems an attempt to trace the interior psychology of a single homosexual male – represented at different ages and in different time periods by the main characters in each segment – and how he ultimately succumbs to or transcends how society views him. "Homo" appears to take place in the far past, where homosexuality is a crime and is relegated to clandestine practice among older men. "Horror"'s '50s setting and its disease plot device calls AIDS to mind and uses that era's Cold War paranoia as a metaphor for fear of infection, with the young scientist as McCarthy-esque scapegoat. And "Hero"'s present day suburban setting shows its child protagonist exhibiting the telltale signs of homosexuality that the former stories suggest have been handed down over time and formed into erroneous modern mythology. "Hero" assures of the child's transcendence of these limiting, mythical categories, whereas the older protagonists of "Horror" and "Homo" either sacrifice themselves or live out their lives in an inescapable prison, a societal zoo for undesirables. Ultimately, *Poison* has revolution running through its blood, and the final image suggests "a child shall lead them." To what we may ask, but Haynes wisely leaves that as a question mark absorbed in a fade-to-white.



Dottie Gets Spanked is Haynes' final short, and it continues the psychological exploration evident in *Poison*, though it is nowhere near as intense as that film. Made for the PBS series *TV Families*, *Dottie* tells the story of Steven Gale (J. Evan Bonifant), a young boy obsessed with Lucille Ball-like sitcom star Dottie Frank (Julie Halston). What's most interesting about the short is Haynes' effortless portrayal of the divide between childhood and adult impulses. He ably conveys the time it takes for new ideas and behaviors to take hold, simply showing the beginnings of sexual, emotional, and other of life's choices as they plant their seeds in his protagonist's mind. One particularly indelible image: a close-up of the boy's red shoes, each foot moving to its own beat. It rhymes with the scene in *Poison* I described at the outset of this essay – the boy's feet are separated and their independent, individual dance calls attention to the space in-between, as if there is a chasm on which both extremes are teetering. The image treads both optimistic and pessimistic impulses, calling, as it does, upon that mythical movie of childhood, *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) while also questioning the power of movies and TV as guiding influences. How much is too much?



Safe is a masterpiece – if for no other reason than the discomfiting feelings of claustrophobia in open space that its imagery so expertly generates. Its visuals have the sterility of Kubrick. They transform familiar suburban and natural landscapes into boxed-in prisons. This complements the story of Carol White (Julianne Moore), a housewife in 1987 California who becomes allergic to her environment. Her disease baffles everyone – her doctors, her husband – and she finally goes to the Wrenwood Center, a New Age health retreat, where she hopes to recover. A childlike viewpoint is evident throughout *Safe*. Carol’s house is filled with possessions and pictures accumulated over a lifetime that constantly haunt her with history. Haynes pans over a family picture display at one point, and it is frightening to see the change in Carol’s expression from early childhood to early adulthood. The smiles of a toddler Carol are juxtaposed with the blank, passive expression of a high school photo, suggesting that this bird has been trapped for years in a gilded cage, completely unawares. Carol is also stepmother to her husband’s son – a metaphor of disconnection from the people around her, and nicely played out in a later scene at Wrenwood when the young son is framed at the far right of the image away from Carol and her husband as if separated by an immense gap. We might call this an illustration of Carol’s loss of innocence, but Haynes doesn’t seem to wholly believe in the innocence of children. Rather, he suggests there are worlds of difference between adult and child – each stage has its own rules of conduct and behavior, and yet it is inevitable that the two sides will confront each other. In Haynes’ work, this is oftentimes a cataclysmic meeting of the minds – from the intentionally mangled Barbie dolls in *Superstar*, to the child’s murder of his father in *Poison*, to Carol’s physical and emotional journey in *Safe*. Indeed, Carol appears to regress, over the course of the film, to a childlike state. Sealing herself in a sterile white igloo at the end of the film, Carol looks in the mirror, past herself and into the audience, and says, “I love you.” In this moment she is born again, but at the expense of the physical trappings of humanity. She is now a child locked in a protective womb, and we regard her both as alien and compatriot. The disease gives Carol identity, and she passes this onto us, *infects us* with her own truth. It’s as powerful an image as that which ends Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), albeit one whose aims are even more ambiguous and unsettling for being confined to a recognizable, earthly plain.



Following the masterpiece comes the culmination. *Velvet Goldmine* sums up Haynes' obsessions with pop culture, music, child and adult psychology, academic structure, sexuality, threes. Everything is here. Adopting the narrative structure of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), Haynes follows British journalist Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), now working for a paper in New York circa 1984 (Orwellian cues abound), as he attempts to discover the current whereabouts of glam-rock superstar Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers). That's the ostensible plot, but it is merely a skeleton on which hangs the true flesh of the story – an abundance of themes, images, ideas that ensure a personal reaction from each viewer. The film bursts at the seams on more than one occasion because of this overload, totally appropriate as it parallels the excessiveness of the glam-rock personas and their era. What I personally find most impressive about *Velvet Goldmine* is the film's examination of artists and their gifts. Where, Haynes asks, do those who create, and their gifts of creation, come from? Likewise, how does an artist adapt to the ever-changing terrain of society and its viewpoints? *Velvet Goldmine* reflects on these questions, coming up not with concrete answers, but more purely emotional ones. I think the criticisms of self-indulgence that some have lobbed at the film might come as a result of its more wild postulations. From the first frame, it posits Oscar Wilde as the original alien life-force that feeds into glam-rock's provocative ideas and poses. A green emerald pin (recalling *The Wizard of Oz* and childhood mythology yet again) is the emblem of this otherworldly artistry, and it survives through to the end of the film, saying that art and those who create it will never die, regardless of the ebb and flow of humanity and its tastes. This is perhaps the most optimistic Haynes assessment, and *Velvet Goldmine's* belief in the power of art makes it a more personal film than many audiences might be willing to accept. Some may also find the intentional revisionist history of the glam-rock story and its participants (David Bowie, Iggy Pop, etc) sacrilegious, though by this point it should be evident that Haynes is not interested in events as they actually happen. Instead he focuses on cumulative experience. The emotional, the intellectual, the physical, all coalesce in *Velvet Goldmine* to create a feeling of a time and a place. The pieces can be analyzed and dissected, pored over and enjoyed, or wholly dismissed, but in *Velvet Goldmine* it is evident that every piece is there for a reason. A true artist is at work here, and as much as he includes himself in the work he never neglects the viewer (the participator) as an essential element of the experience.

What does the future hold for Haynes? As I observed in the introduction, his career appears to move in threes, and the imminent release of his Sirkian melodrama, *Far From Heaven* (2002), may very well mark the beginning of a third movement. Certainly, Haynes' choice to explicitly reference Sirk in his work, where previously such referencing was in subtext only, is the perfect next step. What will the result be? Confounding and ambiguous? Transcendent and satisfying? Most likely that... and all the ineffable variables in-between.



Filmography

Films directed by Haynes:

Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud (1985) (also writer)

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (1987) (also writer, producer)

Poison (1991) (also writer, editor)

Dottie Gets Spanked (1994) (TV) (also writer)

Safe (1995) (also writer)

Velvet Goldmine (1998) (also writer)

Far From Heaven (2002) (also writer)

OTHER CREDITS

He Was Once (1989) Dir: Mary Hestand (producer)

Swoon (1992) Dir: Tom Kalin (actor)

Office Killer (1997) Dir: Cindy Sherman (additional dialogue – uncredited)

Ode (1999) Dir: Kelly Reichardt (poster artist)



Select Bibliography

Haynes, Todd, *Velvet Goldmine: A Screenplay*, Hyperion, November 1998.



Web Resources

Compiled by the author and Michelle Carey

Todd Haynes' Black Couch

[[HTTP://WWW.GEOCITIES.COM/HOLLYWOOD/BUNGALOW/4114/HAYNES.HTM](http://www.geocities.com/hollywood/bungalow/4114/haynes.htm)] As close to an official site as one can get. Includes numerous articles written about Haynes and his films.

Gentlemen Prefer Haynes

[[HTTP://WWW.INDUSTRYCENTRAL.NET/DIRECTOR_INTERVIEWS/TH02.HTM](http://www.industrycentral.net/director_interviews/th02.htm)] Article by Chuck Stephens.

Todd Haynes

[[HTTP://WWW.QUEERTHEORY.COM/HISTORIES/H/HAYNES_TODD.HTM](http://www.queertheory.com/histories/h/haynes_todd.htm)] Good site, part of the *Queer Theory* site, with interviews and reviews.

Todd Haynes' *Poison* and Queer Cinema

[[HTTP://WWW.ROCHESTER.EDU/IN_VISIBLE_CULTURE/ISSUE1/BRYSON/BRYSON.HTML](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue1/bryson/bryson.html)] Article by Norman Bryson.

Safe Official Site [[HTTP://WWW.SONYPICTURES.COM/CLASSICS/SAFE/SAFE.HTML](http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/safe/safe.html)]

Contains all sorts of info on Haynes' second feature.

Haynes' Goldmine

[[HTTP://HOME.HOUSTON.RR.COM/BLASE/ROOT%20FOLDER/TODDTWO.HTML](http://home.houston.rr.com/blase/root%20folder/toddtwo.html)] Interview with Haynes.

Kay's *Velvet Goldmine* Site

[[HTTP://WWW.BAYAREA.NET/%7ETEELK/VELVET/VELVET.HTM](http://www.bayarea.net/%7ETEELK/VELVET/VELVET.HTM)] A fan's reflections on Haynes' glam-rock film. No longer updated, but filled with fun tidbits.

Golden Boy Haynes Glitters with *Velvet Goldmine*

[[HTTP://WWW.IPOPMAG.COM/INTERVIEWS/INT_HAYNES_TODD_981106.HTML](http://www.ipopmag.com/interviews/int_haynes_todd_981106.html)] Article by Aaron Krach.

Zeitgeist Films | Todd Haynes [[HTTP://ZEITGEISTFILMS.COM/DIRECTORS/THAYNES/](http://zeitgeistfilms.com/directors/thaynes/)]

A couple of films can be purchased here.

Click **here** [[HTTP://WWW.AMAZON.COM/EXEC/OBIDOS/EXTERNAL-SEARCH?TAG=SENSESOFCINEM-20&KEY-WORD=TODD+HAYNES&MODE=BLENDED](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/external-search?tag=sensesofcinem-20&key-word=todd+haynes&mode=blended)] to search for Todd Haynes DVDs, videos and books at



[[HTTP://WWW.AMAZON.COM/EXEC/OBIDOS/REDIRECT-HOME/SENSESOFCINEM-20](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/redirect-home/sensesofcinem-20)]



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