



Haynes, Todd (b. 1961)

by Richard C. Bartone

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Since his 1991 film *Poison* won the Grand Jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival, innovative filmmaker Todd Haynes has emerged as the leading figure of the New Queer Cinema.

Haynes' body of work to date includes four feature length films, *Poison*, *Safe* (1995), *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), and *Far from Heaven* (2002), and three shorts, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), *Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud* (1985), and *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993).

Only *Poison*, *Velvet Goldmine*, and *Far from Heaven* deal directly with homosexuality. But all of Haynes' films subvert conventional narrative structure, a structure he associates with the dominant heterosexual culture and its artifacts. The experimental, non-linear, and complex narrative designs of his films qualify them all as queer, according to Haynes.

Haynes was born on January 2, 1961 in Los Angeles. He remembers making his first film at age ten. As a child Haynes was moved and inspired by Robert Stephenson's *Mary Poppins* (1964), and, as a teenager, by Nicholas Roeg's *Performance* (1970), which stars Mick Jagger as a mysterious and androgynous rock star who provides sanctuary to a criminal. These diverse influences may help account for his films' melodramatic flair and excessive stylization.

Haynes attended Brown University, where he developed a love for the American avant-garde cinema and from which he graduated with a degree in Art and Semiotics. After graduation, he became a founding member of Apparatus Productions in New York City, an organization that promotes independent filmmaking.

He also became a member of ACT-UP in the mid-1980s, and credits AIDS activism with "instigating" the early films of the New Queer Cinema.

Superstar, depicting Karen Carpenter's death from anorexia nervosa, begins an investigation of identity that permeates Haynes' films. The singer's self-consciousness of body image and eventual death are partly attributed to a manipulative mother. But the film takes a broader perspective, examining social norms that commodify women's bodies and exposing the danger of equating body image with identity.

By animating Karen's melodrama with puppets that closely resemble Barbie and Ken dolls, Haynes provides a campy edge to tragedy. His unauthorized use of idyllic songs by The Carpenters led A&M Records and Richard Carpenter to file suit against him and the film's distributors, which resulted in the film's abrupt withdrawal from distribution.

Haynes credits the writings of Jean Genet for inspiring the three tales of *Poison*, "Hero," "Horror," and "Homo." The last tale directly employs Genet's writings to illustrate the consequences of disguising one's homosexuality in a prison environment rife with erotic tension.

All three tales, directly or indirectly, explore the consequences of repressing self-identity and the fear and

discontent of gays in society.

After discovering that Haynes received National Endowment for the Arts funds for *Poison*, Reverend Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association wrote Congress warning of its "explicit porno scenes of homosexuals engaged in anal sex." With the New Queer Cinema then in its infancy, the response of NEA chair John Frohnmayer, who noted that *Poison* "illustrates the destructive effect of violence and is neither prurient or obscene," helped give credibility to serious films on queer issues.

Void of explicit "homosexual" content, *Safe* chronicles the process of an unnamed disease that wastes the body of an upper-middle-class woman. The gay community could not fail to notice the parallels between the woman's disease and AIDS and its cultural significance. Haynes criticizes the debilitating effect of finding identity through disease, as well as organizations that make deceptive claims for cures.

Velvet Goldmine, awarded the special jury prize for Artistic Contribution at Cannes, depicts the tumultuous rise and fall of Glam rockers through a fantastical fusion of performance and sexual identity. Haynes recognized that an underground gay subculture used Glam to celebrate the defiance of social regulations through an excessive display of sexuality and to blur the boundaries of masculine and feminine, gay and straight.

In *Velvet Goldmine*, Haynes evokes the writings of Oscar Wilde and the cult of the personality to place flamboyant and theatrical images of androgyny in historical context. Camp, which exists to some degree in all Haynes' films, is most evident in *Velvet Goldmine*, a film that has its foundation, Haynes notes, "in a long tradition of gay reading(s) of the world."

Far From Heaven (2002) pays tribute to one of the most commercially successful directors of 1950s Hollywood, Douglas Sirk. But *Far From Heaven* depicts in a stark and unsettling manner repressed homosexual desire and rampant racism, issues that Sirk could only hint at in the 1950s. Dennis Quaid scores in the role of a husband tormented by his homosexuality. The film garnered four Academy Award nominations, and Haynes suddenly felt disconcerted by Hollywood's acceptance of an experimental and misunderstood queer filmmaker.

Currently, Haynes is ecstatic that Bob Dylan has agreed to cooperate with him on his next film, *I'm Not There: Suppositions on a Film Concerning Dylan*. According to Haynes, the film is structured as a "multiple refracted biopic" that reconstructs and reinvents Dylan in different time periods by seven actors, including a woman.

Each of Haynes' films is unique, each employing a distinctly experimental structure. Yet they are united by a common concern with the problem of identity and by their relentless opposition to the dominant discourses and images of heterosexual Hollywood.

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