

Todd Haynes

I N T E R V I E W S

Edited by Julia Leyda

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Karen Carpenter: Getting to the Bare Bones of Todd Haynes's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*

Sheryl Farber / 1989

From *Film Threat* 1, no. 20 (1989). Reprinted by permission from *Film Threat* and Sheryl Farber.

On a New York oldies station tonight, the Carpenters are the featured recording artists. The DJ notes the *smooth as silk* voice of Karen Carpenter before he plays one of their hits, "Rainy Days and Mondays." The first few strains of the harmonica begin, heralding the melancholy voice of Karen singing—

*Talking to myself and feeling old.
Sometimes I'd like to quit.
Nothing ever seems to fit*

I can't stop listening. The DJ plays all of my Carpenter favorites and I am catapulted into memories of the seventies. "For All We Know" comes on and I am in a music class full of pubescent pimply-faced junior high school kids, reluctantly waving plastic batons, learning how to conduct to Karen's soothing voice and her brother Richard's elaborate arrangements. Actually this is the late seventies and I am wondering why my teacher has chosen a song that I remember from my early childhood—a song that is now only played on the annoying muzak station my mother listens to in the car on the way to the supermarket and piped into the speakers above the aisle of lemon fresh Joy and Bounty. Nonetheless, I am, unlike most of my baton-slinging peers, captivated by the voice of the songstress of the seventies.

The hits just keep coming out of my radio. "We've Only Just Begun,"

written by that diminutive troubadour John Williams. "Close to You," written by Burt Bacharach, who called Karen, at the time of her tragic death at thirty-two, "A magical person with a magical voice." I fall asleep with "Superstar" ringing in my ears.

My reawakened interest in the Carpenters' music began after I sat through a slew of bad films at the New York Film Festival Downtown. The evening seemed like it was going to be representative of the bleak state of underground filmmaking in New York. The last movie to be shown, however, was Todd Haynes's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, a 16mm, forty-three-minute film made in 1987 that has been receiving critical acclaim for over a year now. Along with strong recommendations to see the film from friends I was usually given a brief description—"It's made with Barbie dolls." Like most American women (and even some men) I was no stranger to the Barbie netherworld, and like most women (but unlike many men), I had been forced to reconcile myself with the fact that I would never be built like a Barbie. I was interested to see what director Haynes would do with the issue of anorexia, the disease that eventually led to Karen Carpenter's demise and wondered if the use of Barbie dolls would be purely comic.

The film opens with Karen's mother's point of view in February 1983. She discovers the collapsed, silk-shrouded body of Karen in their Downey, California, home. Then we are shown the outside of a middle-class suburban house (which incidentally was the actual Carpenter digs in Downey) and the question "What happened?" is posed by the narrator. "Let's go back," he says as we are about to enter a journey, first through the streets of sunny Southern California, providing a backdrop for fancy seventies stylized credits, and then through the simulated doll life of Karen Carpenter. With a straightforward narrative we are hooked into the story of Karen Carpenter's life, her rise to stardom and her problem with anorexia that accompanied it. Haynes has also managed to capture the period brilliantly with detailed sets, music that includes the Captain & Tennille and Gilbert O'Sullivan, clips from television such as *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*. There are clips of Richard Nixon, bombs over Cambodia. This seems to counter the clean-cut, close-knit youthful wholesomeness that the media tried to bolster with such teen stars as the Brady Bunch, the Osmonds, and the Carpenters.

I spoke with Todd Haynes at a restaurant that serves healthy, non-fat-tening foods.

Sheryl Farber: Which came first: the idea to make a movie about Karen Carpenter, or the idea to make a TV docudrama-type of film with dolls?

Todd Haynes: Well, the idea to do a film with dolls actually came before anything. I saw this promotional black and white little trailer on television—a vintage piece of TV from the fifties, that introduced the Barbie to the American public. And it had a little miniature interior scene with the doll sitting around the living room, and then Barbie came in and showed Midge her new dress and it also intercut with live action—a little girl opened up a mailbox, shot from inside the mailbox, getting her Barbie fan club mail. And I was really intrigued with the idea of doing a fairly straightforward narrative drawing on pre-existing popular forms, but simply replacing real actors with inanimate objects, with dolls. And being very careful with it and detailed in such a way that it would provoke the same kind of identification and investment in the narrative as any real movie would. But in watching it, this emotional involvement in dolls or something completely artificial, that would possibly make us think. Maybe that's what happens when we see movies, it's more the forms and the structures that they take that provoke the emotional responses; more than the fact that there was, at one point, a real actress or actor in front of the camera. We were watching shadows on a wall carefully fitting into pre-existing forms that we know very well, that we still cry and laugh as if it were a real person.

SF: So you are using the star story docudrama form to grip the viewer but at the same time you're being critical of that very form?

TH: Yes, I think so. The form I used definitely comes from probably the most tabloid form of narrative filmmaking, which is always telling the rise and fall of the fated star and revealing all the inside dirt in careful pre-determined ways. I juxtapose it with other kinds of styles sort of faux documentary style.

SF: The anorexia films we saw in high school—

TH: Exactly. Instructional kinds of films. And also montages which begin like the typical image montage that accompanies a song number in a movie, but beginning to get a little more abstract and more experimental as the film progresses. The film is basically held together by the narrative. And that's what makes people move from being cynical, critically engaged or laughing, to being implicated and emotionally attached to the character. And in a sense, I like it better when the narrative works

than when it fails because since it's with dolls it hooks you in, and you have to admit to your implication by realizing you've been lured into a trap.

SF: This movie seems to appeal primarily to people between the ages of twenty and thirty, particularly I think because of your images of popular culture from the seventies.

TH: The film supposes a kind of turning point in popular culture from the sixties and the seventies that caught all of us in a certain generation at a vulnerable point because we were just starting to think of ourselves autonomously in the early seventies because of our being eight, nine, ten, eleven. And when the music came out, it was such a strong kind of suggestion that everything was fine. The turmoil of the late sixties was over in a second and Nixon was in the White House and things were going to be just great. The family gained new value, of a new pertinence that had been questioned for the previous decade.

SF: It was also the taming of the youth culture.

TH: Yes, completely. Although at the same time the Viet Nam War was raging, Kent State, there was a continued explosion of social protests and causes but at the same time, because of our age, I responded much more to the images of safety and tranquility that were on television and the radio—the Carpenters represent that to such a complete extent. What seemed to happen then is that everything started to fall through like Watergate pulled the rug out from under the Nixon administration. The Carpenters dropped in popularity and disco happened and we just began this really self-absorbed generation of hedonistic pleasures. I think we got cynical and the eighties celebrate that cynicism in a way that we never really anticipated. So when I look back at that period and when I heard the music, after not really hearing it for a long time, it was almost for me like the last time I believed in popular culture and that it worked for me. It manipulated my view of the world and it also united me with my family and their values. Like, this friend of mine said to me, “It was pre-irony.” It was the last moment for our generation that was one of the last earnest sentimental times. The music gained all its resonance that probably, at the time, you would never have thought it carried.

SF: How long did the movie take to make?

TH: The whole film took about a year and a half from writing to completion while carrying on other jobs. I shot it in upstate New York at Bard College. I began an MFA program there, a three-summer long program

and I basically utilized the first summer—I haven't gone back since—to build all the sets and make all the props and by the end of the summer we shot it. I worked on it with three close friends. Cynthia Schneider co-wrote it with me and co-produced it as well. Barry Ellsworth, who is part of Apparatus, helped me shoot it and write it and is really responsible for how beautiful the film looks. Bob Maneti worked on it laboriously as well. So it was a very small core group of maniacs working insane hours. I mean the film was fun but it was really hard. I underestimated how long everything would take.

SF: The film has a strong feminist viewpoint and I know you had a female co-writer; I was wondering how you became sensitive to such issues?

TH: Well, I think the film couldn't have been conceived without Cynthia's participation. Neither of us have experienced anorexia personally but through the process of researching it and involving ourselves I think we both found connections to it that I may never have considered otherwise. I think the pressures and the kinds of neurotic motivations that would result in eating disorders are the same pressures and neurotic feelings that I've experienced but taken out in other ways. But definitely the roots and the causes that I began to see of anorexia were all things I knew really well. I found the whole thing intriguing, the whole story, but I don't think I found it personally comprehensible in the way that I did after researching it. But the response basically has been extremely supportive from the feminist community. There had been a couple of incidents of what I would call a more narrow and dogmatic side of feminism which recoils from the idea of humor being engaged in any way in a film or a work about anorexia—that humor does not have a place in it. And the film does not at any point make fun of anorexia but I do think humor is a tool. It can even be a weapon and it's been a part of cultural production, a really interesting part of it for a really long time. And it can be an incredible political tool and to simply say, “That's not allowed!” I find to be the worst side of feminism or any other kind of political critique of our culture—when it takes on the same dogma that the culture imposes. That's wrong to me.

SF: Did you use those high school-type health films that you imitated to help research anorexia?

TH: No, but we found general material that's available to the public that has the whole tone. And which is just as limited in the whole view of the problem.

SF: You really managed to physically transform Karen's doll to show the effects of her anorexia. How did you get that emaciated effect on her face?

TH: We carved down the plastic cheeks of the doll head. I found dolls at flea markets. I don't think they were actually Barbie dolls. These were dolls that were extremely thin already but the faces were kind of round so I wanted to carve down the cheeks and then cover it over with pancake makeup and have very creepy effects.

SF: I saw a picture of Karen Carpenter from that time and the doll really looks like her. Are the dolls actual Barbie dolls from Mattel?

TH: No, in fact none of them are literally Barbie dolls. The doll that portrays Karen is the Tracy doll, a Mattel product who's the dark-haired current Barbie friend on the market. A Ken doll does portray Richard but he has various wigs and hairpieces throughout the film and by the end of the film we changed his face a lot so it's no longer a Ken doll.

SF: More like some strange mutant.

TH: Exactly. I love the part in *Superstar* where Karen turns around and she says, "I am sick, Richard," and he says, "What do you mean sick, mentally?" And he looks so much sicker than she does.

SF: Did you know about Richard's Quaalude addiction and choose not to explore it?

TH: I didn't know about it, although my film's reference to his private life could be interpreted as referring to his drug habit.

SF: Or his homosexuality.

TH: Yes. But I don't have any solid evidence to what his private life entails so I guess I could leave it open.

SF: So what did you think about the TV movie?

TH: I enjoyed every second of it but I also found it disturbing. I thought it was interesting how it both very carefully revealed and concealed information about them.

SF: Yes, especially the way they treated her eating disorder. I charted scene by scene their showing of her voracious appetite like when the Carpenter family goes bowling, Karen yells eagerly, "Pizza, yeah!" Then "Hot dogs, sure!" They always had her stealing from the cookie jar.

TH: And then "all of a sudden" sort of reversed tack. There were things I didn't know. That they lived together during that period. That was really interesting to learn. I didn't know that Karen's first recording contract was a solo contract. That was really extraordinary. They're really hot. I hear the solo album and it's really an exciting collection of songs that don't sound like Richard Carpenter productions.

SF: They weren't his arrangements?

TH: No. It was during the time that he was detoxing apparently, that's what the movie tells us and she went to New York. They bring it up in the TV movie. She tells him and he immediately gets mad at her but then it switches to the anorexia as the issue. She went to New York during that time and cut an album with Phil Ramone, who's a producer of Billy Joel, and some classics and some disco classics. And it was '79, '80, so it was very disco influenced. It's really interesting because it's her voice up against stronger percussion and none of that saturated vocal background bullshit, which I hate, which is the Richard Carpenter trademark. This is really cool because it's so sad. I don't think people think of Karen Carpenter as diversely as she could have been considered as an artist. She never really got a chance to be anything but Richard Carpenter's product. She never got to experiment with sounds and playing with her voice in different ways. I think maybe if she had, and thought of herself more autonomously, she might have been able to live longer and give herself incentive to not think of herself solely in context of the family and Richard's world. What's really sad is the solo album may never get released because of Richard Carpenter even today. Karen Carpenter's image is still being controlled and manipulated by Richard and the family. That's so sad.

SF: I know that this is getting into the private family stuff that you may not know about. But do you know what Richard's relationship to his parents is? I know he had control over this TV movie and the content is real derogatory to his parents.

TH: His mother gave it her approval. And most people find the mother's depiction extremely critical and harsh. But it only makes you think if the mother okayed this version, you could only imagine what it was like in real life.

SF: Parts of the TV movie seemed to overlap yours, for example the use of the song "Masquerade" when Karen meets her husband Tom Burris. What was your reaction?

TH: I knew that there would be parallels. Partly because I was drawing on the TV movie form to begin with, and obviously when you're doing a TV movie genre about an anorexic pop singer there's going to be similar dialogue. I'm also from California so that the whole colloquialism of that world is familiar to me. People tell me, "They must have seen your movie and stolen from it," but I really think it was accidental.

SF: What is Apparatus involved in now and where are you taking it?

TH: We're still producing work by emerging filmmakers who submit scripts to us. We provide funding and production facilities and guidance. But the director maintains the creative control throughout these projects. We recently signed a contract for a really wonderful partnership with Zeitgeist. They want to fairly aggressively distribute packages of short films each year that we produce or that we're affiliated with in some way called "Apparatus Presents" and try to get them shown theatrically and non-theatrically across the country. They are also very eager in that we travel with the films and discuss the philosophies behind this push toward short filmmaking and experimental narrative filmmaking.

SF: Are the other people involved in Apparatus friends from school?

TH: Yes, we all met at Brown and have worked on each other's films since then. We've all basically continued to work on our own projects on the side, as filmmakers. It's been great. The two films that are coming out this year are even more radical and experimental in a lot of ways than the ones we did last year. One of them is called *La Divina*. It's a heightened, stylized account of a thirties star in the sort of style Garbo shot. It's a very self-critical, perhaps self-conscious look at that whole world. And the other one is called *He Was Once*, sort of based on the *Davey and Goliath* show almost as a reverse to *Superstar*. This takes actors and dresses them up as Claymation puppets and enacts them from that way.

SF: I ask a general state of underground filmmaking question—New York, around the country, etc. . . . where do you see it going?

TH: I think in a small way we've helped. Both Apparatus and the amazing response to *Superstar* have helped the national scene to take more account of marginal filmmaking, short filmmaking, and filmmaking that experiments with narrative forms and styles in ways that I think the general film audiences have been able to take seriously for a long time. At least there's been sort of precedent of fifties and sixties avant-garde, which no one seems to improve upon or we're always comparing

ourselves to, that very high moment in experimental filmmaking in this country. Totally disavowing or ignoring the fact that we've had a lot of important strains in filmmaking since then. That there's been the punk movement in the late seventies. There's been a neo-narrative movement in the early eighties. There's been a conceptual movement in the early seventies and no one seems to talk about that stuff as much as this "high moment" of avant-garde film which still gets screened primarily at places like the Anthology Archives and the Millennium and, until recently, the Collective for Living Cinema. I think we're all eager at Apparatus to push forward and begin to diversify the ways in which we look at narrative again. What's really funny is that I think Hollywood and the studios and the people with money and the cable world are hungry, starved, even, for innovative work so they're not missing a single punch when it comes to small films that get shown at festivals or circulated.

SF: Have they shown your films on cable yet?

TH: No, they haven't. Unresolved music rights really prohibits that. I can't, and they can't, take that risk. The festival showings of *Superstar* have generated a lot of response—not just for that film but for films of its kind. So I think that's really hopeful, I don't think we're seeing the revolution yet but . . . it really surprises me that the big professionals of the industry have also found it inspiring. To me that means that everyone is eager for something different.

SF: What is the fascination with pop culture?

TH: I think it's inevitable given that we're in such an information-ridden society and we appropriate the past so quickly that you can barely call it the past. Things get taken up so quickly and become retro at this sort of hyper-accelerated speed, so that I sometimes think that the context gets lost and this massive attempt to re-examine the past kind of equates and collapses meaning or I guess purpose. It also comes out of Hollywood. I think in *Blue Velvet*, *Hairspray*, *River's Edge*, and even Coppola's *Tucker*, there's a real official fascination with popular culture. I think those films are actually a better example of a lot of commercial films that are also obsessed with the past. But I think it's cool. We're learning how to refer to and play with other genres; I just think sometimes the style precedes the purpose and the content. We need to know why we're looking at the past and what we're trying to learn from it and ultimately how it's informing the present. It gets really fun to do sometimes. It may be more fun than valuable and I think there's a danger there in just collapsing the reasons behind it.

I think the one thing that is evident with *Superstar* is that it's all contrasted examples of artifice. It's all fake. It's a doll world that's made to look like a real world. Or it's sort of a pseudo-documentary, collages that are also scripted and completely constructed. So it's different examples of so-called truth that you, as a viewer, have to weigh against each other. I also think I was lucky in subject matter because the Carpenters provided a perfect dialectic, almost a before and after. The before being this one image of purity and wholesomeness and good-naturedness, and the after being this despair and anorexia. So you could very easily read one against the other and that was helpful both at looking at the early seventies, just culturally in this country and whatever memories we associate with them as viewers, but also in the music itself. At first those songs seem banal and manipulative and overly sentimental. They gain a new kind of depth as we've learned how Karen Carpenter has suffered. There's a real sadness and the voice gets all the more beautiful as you find out. You listen to it and you can't stop.

Todd Haynes: The Intellectual from Encino

Jeffrey Lantos / 1991

From *Movieline*, January 3, 1991. Reprinted by permission from Jeffrey Lantos.

I've just caught up with a remarkable film. It's called *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, and it was made three years ago by Todd Haynes, a Brown University-educated writer-director who is now thirty. Regrettably, you won't find this film in the video stores or catch it on cable. That's because Haynes received a cease-and-desist order from some big-shot lawyers who also wanted him to destroy every print of the film. Even if Haynes had agreed to that (he didn't), it wouldn't have mattered, because bootlegged video copies of *Superstar* are available, although if you're lucky enough to get hold of one, it'll probably be a grainy, ninth-generation copy.

The person who hired the big-shot lawyer, the person who has done all he can to prevent you from seeing a fresh print of *Superstar*, is Richard Carpenter, the older, living half of the brother-sister singing duo, the Carpenters. Remember Karen and Richard of Downey, California? She of the honeyed voice? He of the syrupy arrangements? Both with the bangs and the showbiz teeth? Emblematic of seventies youth, they were invited by Richard Nixon to perform at the White House. We see that scene in the film. Well, sort of. The Carpenters are not exactly in the White House. And, to be honest, they're not exactly singing either, because the actors who play Karen and Richard are not really singers. In fact they're not actors, either. They're dolls. That's right, folks, this is a movie starring dolls from the Ken and Barbie collection. Have you ever seen one doll goading another, anorexic doll into eating a piece of chocolate cake? You will here. What about a chiseled-down, sunken-cheeked doll collapsing on stage during a concert? Hey, welcome to the wacky world of Todd Haynes. It's a world you enter laughing and exit disturbed.

Cinematic/Sexual: An Interview with Todd Haynes

Justin Wyatt / 1992

From *Film Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1993). Reprinted by permission from the University of California Press and Justin Wyatt.

Justin Wyatt: Has your academic background had a bearing on your filmmaking practice?

Todd Haynes: In high school I had a teacher named Chris Adams. Chris had studied with Beverle Houston at USC and that was really important to her way of thinking about film. Chris showed a lot of experimental films in her classes, which was great. We saw James Benning, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, *Oh Dem Watermelons*, even the trash classics of early American avant-garde cinema.

I remember that it was a big breakthrough for me when Chris Adams said, based on Beverle Houston's writings, that film is not reality. Reality can't be a criterion for judging the success or failure of a film, or its effect on you. It was a simple, but eye-opening, way of approaching film. You would go to these new Hollywood films and you would say, "It wasn't very realistic, that wasn't a very 'real' scene." This sense of real all the time was pervasive, very easy, and a completely accepted form of critiquing and analyzing what worked and what didn't work. But it wasn't a way of critiquing at all: it was really a way we represent ourselves. So that approach was planted in my brain as a way of looking at film as completely constructed, and then trying to create different criteria for how to look at film.

I actually made my first film in high school—with a crew and a big production. It was called *The Suicide*. We emulated the Hollywood practice of oppression: script girls and all the obligatory hierarchies and stuff. I was the co-producer. I wrote the story for a thesis exam in high school, and it's a film that actually is very similar to *Poison* in structure: it has

all these different voices and intercuts all these different realities. We started to shoot it in tenth grade, and we worked on it for two years. The entire second year was devoted to the sound track. We started in Super-8, but by the end of the year we had blown up all the tracks to 35mm. We were able to use the Samuel Goldwyn studios to do our final mix through film brat kids' connections. We went in and did it right after *Barnaby Jones* and right before *The Last Waltz*. At the end, for our final party, we rented a theater in Westwood and somebody hired a limo to pick us up and take us to the theater. I was so disgusted with the whole thing that I vowed to make weird, experimental, personal films, with no sound, for a while. This idea continued to develop and become clearer throughout college.

At that time I was also very seriously into painting. A lot of people who know me from Brown probably think of me more as a painter than as a filmmaker. While studying film theory and getting pretty excited about it, I found that there was something very different about what could be expressed in film. To me the difference was societal and political. It was a matter of using images and representation.

In a way, I felt that I had acquired a skill about representing things as a child. I would practice and practice—I would draw all the time. It was replication of what representation is. By the time I was in college and painting abstractly, I felt that these acquired representations were a weird burden that I carried. Just ignoring them would be a denial that I thought was important to address. In a way, I wanted to use these emblems, these images of the world that I had perfected: images of men, images of women, who look this way and that way, that you can take apart to put on the canvas, and then take apart and discuss. But I kind of hated them. I hated representation, I hated narrative, and yet I felt that I had to deal with it, I had to. I thought that film was the most appropriate medium for an exploration of that idea.

JW: You've said that one of the reasons you made *Superstar* was to experiment with questions of identification and to see whether audiences could become emotionally connected to these Barbie dolls. What did you learn from this experiment?

TH: I learned that people will identify at the drop of a hat [laughs] at almost anything. I think that it's an essential need when we go to a film, and a really exciting need to know about and not simply fulfill. There's this aspect of creating narratives in a commercial sense that I hate, and you see it in so many ways in movies over and over and over again: this

need to create a likable central character with quirks and interesting things to say. It's a horrible mirroring of the need to affirm who we are through stories and make ourselves big and huge on the screen. I hate it and yet, at a very basic level of narrative, I think that it happens. So I'm always caught in the dilemma of feeling that it's still absolutely necessary to work with stories, because they are a weird mechanical and emotional hybrid that we all react to. There is an incredible potential since people go in with expectations that you can never meet part way, and then alter—because you have them, they're emotionally engaged.

JW: Your experiments with genre, narrative, and character identification destabilize a lot of the traditional ways through which pleasure is derived from film. What do you think the relationship is between cinematic pleasure and style in your films?

TH: I think that there is real stylistic play in both *Superstar* and *Poison*. In a way, it's the most on-the-surface example of the films' element of fun and play. I think in *Superstar*, more than in *Poison*, the way style is played with is what makes you laugh. It's this absurd miniaturization of the bourgeois success story, and you laugh at how all the obligatory elements of the 1970s family are miniaturized and present in the film and how it follows the genre of the star film with Barbie dolls. I think what is actually pleasurable about the film is the identification which you finally achieve with Karen through all the distancing. In a way, the play of style can be an alienation. You laugh, but you're not really interested in the story or the ideas or the emotions. It's not helping you identify with the film; in fact, it's keeping you outside of it in ways that provoke as much thought as the weird feeling of having identified with a plastic doll.

I think *Poison* works in different ways. Again, I think the style is the intercutting of disparate stories and that's the fun and it is funny at points. I don't know what's pleasurable about *Poison*, except something very sad, that is only pleasurable because it's hopefully truthful to people's experiences.

JW: How interested are you in deconstructing generic frameworks? *Poison* relies strongly on the documentary and horror genres, while *Superstar* could be read as an affliction movie or a star story.

TH: I don't know if the films are interested in deconstructing those genres as much as in referring to them, using common knowledge about them to talk about other things. The affliction movie gives the central

character her identity through her disease and all of a sudden that's supposed to be a complete identity when the disease is determined. In the star story, the star is the dual identity of success and fame, and then an evil element brings about the decline or fall.

Similarly, in *Poison*, it's how all three of these genres or styles have a history of dealing with the notion of transgression and taking care of that threat in various ways. For a genre fan, maybe the film is really fun and fulfills all of those deconstructive and, at the same time, recuperative instincts. I just thought that the film needed to be in three different styles and that I wanted all the styles to relate to the central theme.

JW: But are you looking for an emotional response?

TH: Yes, definitely. I think what makes *Poison* really work for some people is that it gets under your skin and makes you feel something . . . usually something very sad or disturbed. For other people, though, that doesn't happen. For some people, it's an intellectual game: it's just, "Oh, the documentary and the horror one are funny, and the other one is serious all the way through." In some sense, it's a very conventional, very mainstream, very Hollywood wish on my part that the film saddened you, and becomes more than what you're seeing—maybe by the end or by the last third. If it doesn't touch you in some way, if it ultimately doesn't overcome its structure, its intelligence, its cleverness, I would be unhappy.

JW: What are your views on the argument of essentialism versus social constructionism in homosexuality? How does this influence your filmmaking?

TH: Oh, a really easy question [laughs]. I tend to have a continued gut-level criticism that kicks in whenever essentialism is brought up. In a way it wasn't until gay theory was ushered in by people like Diana Fuss, identifying the essentialist versus social-constructivist perspectives, that I realized how significant and important feminism is. Gay theory as well, of course, but there's been so much more written about feminism. There's more of a multiplicity of perspectives around it. It was the first time that you had to acknowledge essential differences, not simply say that the whole idea of femininity and womanliness was solely a societal construct, that the traditions of femininity were imposed and constructed by men. To counter that with something else, a perspective that has to do with a not necessarily biologically different way of existing in the world, but a biological difference that creates social reaction

and institutions—really interesting and complex ways of fighting these societally imposed notions of essential difference . . .

With homosexuality and my films . . . I don't know that in *Poison* there is evidence for arguments of essential difference in homosexuality. Instead there is an attempt to link homosexuality to other forms that society is threatened by—deviance that threatens the status quo or our sense of what normalcy is. I don't believe that there is an essential gay sensibility either. What is so interesting about minorities identifying themselves historically and rewriting their own history is that, in a sense, it is an attempt to create an essential difference that isn't really true. But it's one that they are writing, as opposed to the status quo. So it's a way of disarming the conventions of difference that have been imposed on us and rewriting our own differences.

JW: David Ehrenstein used as the headline for his review of *Poison* in the *Advocate*: “*Poison* is the most important gay American film since *Mala Noche*.” How do you feel about the film being appropriated in that way by gay culture?

TH: I think it's fine. The film is absolutely the result of AIDS and also a result of Genet. Obviously both of these facets are essential to gay history, to gay texts, and I think there are all kinds of ways that the film can be important to reexamining, at this particular point in history, being gay. To begin with I was just frustrated with this defensive, fearful acceptance of the terms that AIDS imposed on what being gay meant: provoking gay people to clean up their act and become inoffensive to society. All of a sudden there was this metaphor for homosexuality lurking, this awful, horrible metaphor of AIDS that had to be continually distinguished, and I think it should be distinguished, from homosexuality.

At the same time, what is so fascinating about Genet is that he was deeply interested in what was particularly transgressive, and only what was transgressive, about homosexuality—and what was erotic about it as well. That went along with the underground, disturbing, dark, and at times intense betrayal of lovers and trusted people that is hard for a lot of people, including myself, to deal with. I think Genet wrote about a strangely united political and erotic charge that he experienced with regard to homosexuality that was violent, that was based on upsetting the norm and not at all on finding a nice, safe place that society will give you.

JW: Does that relate to your personal feelings about homosexuality?

TH: Yes, definitely. I felt that it was so sad to be weak and apologetic about who we were as a result of AIDS when the fucking society was letting us die. So it was like, look around, people don't give a shit about you. If the only power we have is the power to upset the norm, then let's use it and not try to iron it out. AIDS is inert, it doesn't have a brain, it doesn't choose, it's just the accident of a virus. Someone's sick joke has single-handedly affected all the disenfranchised, all the oppressed; it's the cruelest twist of fate. It gives so many people the ammunition to maintain things the way they are. That definitely inspired the film, and I feel that it is really important for gay people to look at it.

JW: The concept of labeling seems really important to *Poison*: the first scene with Broom being admitted to prison—centering on his acceptance of the label “homosexual,” the ways in which the neighbors are bothered by Richie because they can't label him. Can you talk about how labeling structures the film?

TH: It was something that I was definitely thinking about—from Genet, who so eloquently writes about how language provoked his violence more than anything. It was as though being called gay, thief, provoked the need to react, and in a sense reclaim those terms, make them uglier, more disturbing and abject than society could ever imagine. Maybe just being in possession of the labels was enough. It was the world that Genet could create to survive those years in prison and enjoy them as fully as he did.

I was really interested in the initial aspects of that—the whole idea of naming and branding people, and what traumas it provokes. Basically, I wanted to investigate the James Baldwin quote about the victim who can articulate his experience no longer being a victim. He has become a threat. So it's about articulation. That's the thing that gets these people: Richie is probably the most in control of anyone in the film, Broom learns how to speak, he is always able to articulate his desires, even if it is just to us. That's how they survive and also how they learn from their suffering. In a sense it's also why they seek out their experiences—there's something masochistic about that strain in Genet, and in *Poison* . . . absolutely. It's about accepting terms only in so far as you can use them and turn them back around.

JW: What responsibilities, if any, do you feel you have being a filmmaker who is gay?

TH: I think that I should be creating positive images of homosexuality

to spread around the world, on television, through the mass media to show people that gays are positive, they're just like them. That's my role. That's my job [laughs]. I am being sincere.

JW: So you want to make a film like *Making Love*, for example?

TH: . . . and *Lost Companion*. Is it *Lost Horizon* or *Lost Companion*? I get those fantasy things mixed up. "Let's imagine all the AIDS people returning at the end." Obviously, I have problems with the protocol of that. In fact, I have a lot of frustration with the insistence on content when people are talking about homosexuality. People define gay cinema solely by content: if there are gay characters in it, it's a gay film. It fits into the gay sensibility, we got it, it's gay. It's such a failure of the imagination, let alone the ability to look beyond content. I think that's really simplistic. Heterosexuality to me is a structure as much as it is a content. It is an imposed structure that goes along with the patriarchal, dominant structure that constrains and defines society. If homosexuality is the opposite or the counter-sexual activity to that, then what kind of a structure would it be? I think that it has been documented in film theory that conventional narrative form adheres to and supports basic ideological positions and structures in society and enforces heterosexual closure and romance in films. For me, it's the way the narrative is structured, the way that films are machines that either reiterate and reciprocate society—or not.

JW: What are your feelings about those mainstream films concerning homosexuality?

TH: I think that they're straight because of the structure. Most films don't experiment at all with narrative form, basically fitting a very conventional boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl structure. If you simply replace boy meets girl with boy meets boy, it's not really doing anything different at all. Of course, seeing two men kiss in a movie is important, but I think it needs more than that. That just replaces the content and pretends that the structure is natural. It's not as if the content has been determined by the form in the way it's being told to you. It's more exciting to think of revising, rethinking the ways that films are put together—the way you are positioned as a viewer, the way you are told to identify with characters or not, the way that the film is alive because of the work that you do as a viewer. It's a really just a reflection on the wall otherwise.

Appendix: An Interview with Todd Haynes

Michael William Saunders / 1995

From *Imps of the Perverse: Gay Monsters in Film* by Michael William Saunders.

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Following is a transcript of a phone interview I conducted with Todd Haynes on January 16, 1995. In the text, "T" refers to Mr. Haynes, and "M" refers to Michael Saunders. In redacting this interview, I have attempted to keep the transcript as close to being a word-for-word account as my typing abilities will allow. Inevitably, this attempt will convey to the reader both my own verbal sloppiness and the extraordinary elegance and acute focus of Mr. Haynes's conversation. I apologize to the readers for asking them to endure the former, and I am pleased to be able to present evidence of the latter.

M: To begin with, what I'm doing with this work is I'm looking at images of homosexual characters as monsters in film. So my departure point is first backing up and asking some questions and getting some things in the foreground of my awareness as I think about all this and trying to see how I want to define homosexuality in terms of monstrosity from the beginning and play with that idea. And it seems that, when I try to put all of what I know about homosexuality and monstrosity and images together, my departure point is this: namely, that traditional culture tends to view homosexuality as monstrous in two senses: first as a deformation of the natural order as defined by sexuality, as defined by expressions of relationships—human relationships—in the first sense, as a kind of deformation; and in the second sense, as a kind of omen: homosexuality tends to be viewed in conservative culture which, now frighteningly seems to be reasserting itself, but it tends to get viewed as a form of