Thinking and Re-thinking Whiteness: Todd Haynes' *Safe*

Rebecca Scherr
University of Oslo

Abstract: In this essay, I look at the various ways that Todd Haynes' 1996 independent film, Safe, *incorporates the discourses of whiteness, queerness, and subjectivity more generally. Drawing from critical race theory, film theory, queer theory and phenomenology, I examine the various ways that* Safe *positions whiteness as an identity formed by corporeal and spatial habits. By revealing whiteness as a habit,* Safe *renders whiteness, which is usually represented in American film as non-racial, as an embodied racial identity. By making what usually passes as invisible visible, the film exposes whiteness to scrutiny and (potential) deconstruction.* Safe *is thus an example of radical filmmaking in its ability to expose the ways in which our identities are always shifting and contingent, and it opens new avenues for thinking and re-thinking the concept of whiteness.*

Keywords: Todd Haynes—Safe (motion picture)— Film studies—Whiteness studies— New Queer Cinema—queer theory—phenomenology

Studies of American cinema that account for the construction of racial difference as an effect of whiteness are surprisingly rare.[1] This lack of scholarship is puzzling considering that it is impossible to separate the emergence of American cinema as we know it from popular constructions of racial

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1   This is despite the impact of Richard Dyer's widely cited 1988 essay in *Screen*, "White," which he followed up with a book by the same title. Some studies that discuss whiteness in relation to American cinema include Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Susan Courtney, *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation* (Princeton University Press, 2005); and Daniel Bernardi (ed.), *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (Rutgers University Press, 1996).

difference that privilege whiteness by demonizing or objectifying people of color, especially African Americans. After all, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the first truly feature length film, the film that is universally hailed as ushering in Hollywood filmmaking, centres on the virtuous white woman suffering at the hands of a black male rapist. Linda Williams suggests that *Birth* linked "the power of a new medium ... to the experience of new racial sympathy. ... Both became integral to the very formation of national identity" (7). While I agree with Williams that what was new in *Birth* was the way the film evoked "racial sympathy" through depicting the white woman's suffering body, the structure of white privilege that such an evocation of sympathy rested on was not new at all—in fact, it has been part of the very fabric of America itself, one of the most long-standing "habits" of racial identity formation in America.

Safe, Todd Haynes' film from 1996 and the subject of this essay, repeats this foundational trope of American filmmaking by focusing on the white woman's suffering body. Yet *Safe* repeats this foundational image with a difference: the film suggests that Carol White (Julianne Moore), our protagonist, perceives the source of her own suffering as emanating from an encroaching and threatening "blackness," manifest in both overt and symbolic ways throughout the film. Yet, all the while, the film communicates to the *spectators* that Carol's suffering actually emanates from "whiteness" or white subjectivity itself. The film thus positions "whiteness" as the source of a pervasive cultural illness to which white people themselves are blind, and in showing this, attempts to remove the audiences' own blinders. Through its carefully constructed *mise-en-scène* and unusual camera work, *Safe* forces us to feel, in our bodies, the horror of Carol's life: the horror of whiteness, if you will, when it is challenged by its environment. My intention in this essay is to show how Haynes does this, and explore the potential such an analysis has for addressing pressing issues like white privilege and racism as they are practiced in film production.

Whiteness as habit

When I use the term "whiteness" in this essay, I am using it in the way it has been defined within the field of critical race studies. "Whiteness" does not only signify white people. The "ness" addition connotes a state of existence, a condition, a way of being. In the context of American cultural history, the condition of white people has been one of legal and social privilege

in comparison to people of color, hence "whiteness" is not simply a marker of difference: "the concept of whiteness was premised on white supremacy rather than mere difference. ... Thus, the concept of whiteness is built on both exclusion and racial subjugation ... whiteness [is] not merely race, but race plus privilege" (Harris 1737-38). Cheryl Harris traces the social construction of race in America within the concept of property. Basing her analysis on property law, she looks to legal history to pinpoint the specifically American origins of whiteness as a privileged racial identity:

> Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slaves, the racial line between black and white was extremely critical; [whiteness] became a line of protection and demarcation from the potential threat of commodification, and it determined the allocation of benefits and burdens of this form of property. White identity and whiteness were sources of privilege and protection; their absence meant being the object of property. (1720-21)

Such racialized forms of privilege, in antebellum America inscribed in law and thus blatant, did not disappear even as the legal system shifted in jumps and starts towards equal protection. What once was practiced outwardly as a form of property—whiteness as giving one the power to own, or at the very least to not *be* owned—has over time transformed into a kind of internal structure governing American ideas of racial difference. In other words, white privilege was once concretized in the form of property and freedom, but is now practiced more as a concept. As a tool of power, whiteness functions by defining white peoples' sense of entitlement and moral superiority; in turn, whiteness shapes the world in its own image and passes this reflection off as objective truth, and this power of definition is another, more subtle, form of property ownership.

Simply because whiteness functions conceptually or "invisibly" in this way does not mean that it is harmless—quite the opposite, in fact. "Invisibility" is the source of whiteness' power. Several critical race scholars, Peggy McIntosh in particular, have pointed out that white privilege is so entrenched within American identity formation and the structures of American life that white people are taught to *not* recognize it. Thus, one of the most insidious aspects of whiteness as a racial category is that, in general terms, it is an invisible identity for white people. In its power to define subjectivity, whiteness functions by being the norm against which all other racial identities are measured, rarely calling attention to itself as a specific identification or category. In other words, whiteness is most often represented as *non-racial*. In this construction white people don't "have" a

race. Thus whiteness as the unmarked racial category perpetuates a white supremacist culture, but precisely because of the invisibility of whiteness for white people, white culture claims otherwise: "critical race theorists have assumed that the power of whiteness arises from its appropriation of the universal and that the universal is opposed to and hence devoid of the particular" (Wiegman 117). Richard Dyer puts it this way: "Having no content, we can't see that we have anything that accounts for our position of privilege and power" (9). At the center of the notion of "whiteness," then, is a deep negation of both self and other: a negation on the one hand of the particularity of whiteness, and on the other hand a negation or disavowal of the power structure that constructs white people as "us" (with all inherent privileges) and people of color as "them."

Dyer's important book, *White*, is a detailed analysis of the ways that images and narratives of whiteness structure visual culture, and, by extension, national and international discourses of power. One of his chapters focuses on cinematic lighting—one of the technical aspects of film—and how this feature of film production aids in constructing white vision, and ultimately, white privilege:

> The photographic media and, *a fortiori*, movie lighting, assume, privilege, and construct whiteness. The apparatus was developed with white people in mind and habitual use and instruction continue in the same vein, so much so that photographing non-white people is typically constructed as a problem ... stocks, cameras, and lighting were developed taking the white face as the touchstone. (89-90)

Underlying these statements are two very important points. One, that it is not only on the level of film narrative that whiteness as the unmarked is produced and reproduced in American cinema, but white hegemony is also perpetuated through the technological aspects of film: *all* aspects of American cinema are shot through with whiteness. Secondly, that this privileging of whiteness is a habit (Dyer talks about "habitual use.") Because habits are learned and not essential, they can be re-framed and changed; therefore focusing on the concept of habit allows for intervention, for the possibility of *changing habits*.

By discussing whiteness as a habit and not as an essential identity, it is revealed not merely as skin color, but whiteness is also about what we do, how we do what we do, and where we position ourselves in space. In short, a focus on habit allows us to examine the fully embodied aspects of whiteness, as well as the methods through which whiteness is produced and reproduced—cinema representing only one site for the circulation of such

meaning. Cinema is simply one instrument in the perpetuation of white-ness as the status quo, and as some have argued, the history of American cinema itself is a "history of white vision" in which whiteness remains the unmarked, the unmentioned, the invisible structure in which race as a cat-egory is nevertheless framed (Courtney 5). Because of its status as a mass-cultural phenomenon, cinema is a particularly rich site for questioning and analyzing representational habits regarding racial difference. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison asks about American literature: "[H]ow is 'liter-ary whiteness' and 'literary blackness' made, and what is the consequence of that construction?" (xii). The same question should be asked regarding the construction of "cinematic" whiteness and blackness in America, and *Safe* attends to this question by upsetting the filmic representational habits by which the suffering white woman's body is framed within the whiteness paradigm. By using this now iconic image of such a raced, sexed body, and then revealing the ideologies that have actually produced it, Haynes transforms this familiar image into something strange. In the next section, I argue that this is a "queer" move designed to communicate to audiences the contingency and instability of whiteness as a category of identity and power. When the fixity of whiteness is no longer assumed, whiteness loses its invisibility; and in being revealed as a habitual embodiment rather than a fixed essence, we can begin the discussion of rethinking and re-con-ceptualizing what whiteness signifies. *Safe* attempts to participate in this process.

Todd Haynes and New Queer Cinema

Todd Haynes' filmic roots are in independent cinema, although he is most widely known for his first Hollywood production, *Far from Heaven* (2002). Haynes established his reputation as an up-and-coming film writer and di-rector in 1991 by winning the Grand Jury prize at Sundance for *Poison*, an experimental and "pastiche" film that is *homage* to the French writer, Jean Genet. Other major works include *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a fictional look at the glam rock world of the 70s where bisexuality and gender ambiguity were the "norms" within the scene, and most recently Haynes has received recognition for his highly experimental yet star-studded Bob Dylan biopic, *I'm Not There* ".

Poison in particular was key in establishing Haynes as one of the ma-jor contributors to what B. Ruby Rich famously coined the New Queer

Cinema.[2] NQC refers to a series of films from the early 1990s that contain explicitly gay themes. These films won widespread critical praise despite breaking radically with cinematic conventions of both narrative content and filmic form. NQC films are, as Michele Aaron puts it, "both radical and popular, stylish and economically viable" (3). The early 1990s are therefore considered a turning point in queer representation in film. In NQC films, gay directors no longer sought societal approval through positive depictions of homosexuality, nor did they represent homosexuality as inherently sick; both of these narrative trajectories had been conventional in the history of film representation up until the 90s. Instead, NQC films were not afraid to show gay identified characters with all their faults. While often dealing with characters that were both homosexual and psychologically damaged, NQC directors nevertheless refused to position gay identification *itself* as pathological, that is, as the source or root cause of psychological damage.

According to Michael DeAngelis, Haynes' unique contribution to NQC is that he does not limit himself to making queer cinema simply by depicting homosexuality. DeAngelis quotes from a 1993 interview with Haynes: "People define gay cinema solely by the 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" (Haynes quoted in DeAngelis 42). Haynes, instead, in DeAngelis' words, "[rejects] any notion of essence in identity . ... Using a variety of cinematic forms, Haynes 'queers' heterosexual, mainstream narrative cinema by making whatever might be familiar or normal about it strange, and in the process hypothesising alternatives that disrupt its integrity and ideological cohesiveness" (ibid.) In other words, some of Haynes' films either elide the presentation of homosexuality altogether or present it on the sly, yet this does not mean that a queer sensibility is absent. On the contrary, by relentlessly seeking to undermine normative categories of identity—gay, straight, black, white, woman, man   Haynes' films participate in a queer project by de-familiarizing and re-valuing seemingly "unproblematic" gender, racial, and sexual identities.

Safe fits into this context: on its surface, it seems to have little or nothing to do with queer thematics (i.e. gay) or queer film in general. It is a slowly unfolding film that tells the story of Carol White, a suburban L. A. house-

2   Other New Queer Cinema filmmakers include Tom Kalin, Greg Araki, Marlon Riggs, Derek Jarman, Gus Van Sant, and Isaac Julien, among others.

wife whose life shifts dramatically with the onset of Environmental Illness (abbreviated in this essay as EI.) In some ways, the film tells a deceptively simple story: we watch Carol's worsening symptoms and the increasing intensity of her allergic reactions first to the city itself (in the form of car fumes), then within her home (household chemicals), and finally, and most intimately, to her husband (although she blames it on his cologne). Eventually, Carol moves to a New Age residential facility in the New Mexico desert, where she is told that the source of her illness is her own poor self-image: the center's guru tells Carol that she just needs to "love herself" more, and she will heal.

Several scholars discuss the queer *sensibility* that pervades the film. Jose Esteban Muñoz, for example, writes: "The environmental illness from which Carol suffers sounds like an AIDS-related illness in many ways" (135). Haynes himself corroborates this assessment; he has repeatedly stated in interviews that in *Safe*, he draws parallels between the treatment of AIDS in 1980s America and the treatment of EI, a diagnosis that began to gain currency at the same time as the AIDS crisis hit. Glyn Davis also reads queerness into the film when he interprets the presentation of EI as Carol's unconscious manifestation of her desire to escape compulsory heterosexuality; by taking on an identity as an ill woman, Carol "fails to fulfil the role of ideal white woman" (Davis 192). According to Muñoz, furthermore, *Safe* is not only a "queer" film, but it is NQC's "most complex and substantial mapping of the cultural logic of whiteness. It does this work through indirect routes, deploying strategies of connotation, analogy, and deep symbolism" (Muñoz 134). Davis' and Muñoz's interpretations both point to the intertwining of "whiteness" and "queer" in *Safe*, although neither critic delves deeply into the intersections between these two concepts.

What I am getting at is that *Safe* is not a queer film in terms of representing so-called "alternative" or "minority" sexualities. Rather, Haynes uses "queer" as a kind of active trope, and what he does is *queer whiteness*. To actively "queer" something (such as to "queer representation" or to "queer whiteness") means, in the context of this essay, to expose identity markers we take for granted as in fact unpredictable, culturally relative, and constantly fluctuating. *Safe* is "queer" because as a film it functions as an agent or mode of representation that seeks to undermine the audience's own sense of surety or stability regarding identitarian categories. Haynes uses the insights of queer theory to perform critical work regarding whiteness: in making whiteness strange, in "disrupting its ideological cohesiveness,"

in revealing the contingency of white identity, old forms and conceptions of whiteness begin to crack wide open.

Signifying whiteness in *Safe*

Safe's protagonist, Carol White, absolutely radiates whiteness. Clearly Carol's last name signifies whiteness, as does her appearance. Carol is a paragon of white womanhood, a kind of porcelain figure: creamy pale skin, slim body, red hair. Haynes also makes sure to characterize her as wealthy, which completes the illusion of ideal white womanhood. White, slim, beautiful, heterosexual, and rich, in short, Carol possesses all the trappings of seeming happiness and acceptance in mainstream American culture.

In the opening scene of the film, we as spectators take Carol's point-of-view, watching large, expensive homes slide past through the windshield of a luxury car, until the car turns into the driveway of "one of the largest homes, a stately English country-style house": the White residence (*Screenplays* 103). The film then cracks this illusion of perfect whiteness in the very next scene. An overhead camera shows Carol and her husband making love, and the position of the camera focuses on Carol's face. She appears bored, unmoved, with no passion, no pleasure. This lack of affect on Carol's part is the film's first communication of a sense of emptiness that the various displays of wealth and conjugal heterosexuality are not sources of pleasure for her but are rather a kind of shell or surface. In this establishing shot, then, Haynes uses the specter of heterosexuality and its failure as a source of pleasure for Carol as a way to begin deconstructing whiteness and its class and sexual dimensions. Thus problematic heterosexuality functions as a catalyst for the various ways the film will continue to queer whiteness throughout.

Other simple signifiers of whiteness include a relatively long scene that shows Carol drinking a large glass of milk; the camera lingers on her drinking and we hear the sounds of her swallowing, and later in the film Carol remarks, "I'm a total milkaholic." Of course, Carol's milieu is completely white, although in a life such as hers, all housework is performed by Hispanic maids, pointing again to whiteness as a class marker. But it is the arrival of a black couch into Carol's immaculate, pastel living room that really initiates the film's unravelling of the habits of whiteness; not incidentally, it is also this unwelcome arrival that seems to precipitate Carol's illness. Carol comes home one day to find that a new couch has arrived while she was out, and upon seeing it exclaims: "We did *not* order black—this

is *not* what we ordered," an unusually strong and decisive statement from Carol, who throughout the film mumbles constantly and is rarely able to articulate a finished sentence. From this point in the film, the narrative of Carol's sickness begins; she begins reacting, sometimes violently, to the various fumes and chemicals in her environment.

The symbolism of the couch is underscored in another scene, when Rory, Carol's stepson, reads aloud a report he is writing for school, describing in graphically violent detail how in Los Angeles, where the Whites live in a cozy suburban enclave, black and latino gangs are encroaching into the affluent suburbs, bringing with them violence and drugs. Rory recites: "Rapes, riots, shooting innocent people, slashing throats, arms and legs being dissected, were all common sights in the black ghettoes of L. A. Today black and Chicano gangs are coming into the valleys and mostly white areas more and more." The supposed safety of white suburbia is seemingly under threat by the mere idea of those dark, aggressive, urban "others." Later in the film, when Carol is suffering EI acutely, she builds a "safe room" in the basement of her home. Every part of this room is swathed in white: bedclothes, nightstand, even the floors and walls of the room are covered in white, matching the white, allergy-free clothes Carol begins to wear as her illness increases in intensity. Here Haynes aligns the desire for "safe space" with the creation of "white space." The arrival of the black couch and its corollary, the imaginary threat of those "dark others" encroaching into Carol's environment, are symbolically linked to the desire for safe space, which is coded white.[3]

What Haynes is doing in all of these instances is showing that "whiteness" is not merely signified by skin-color, but whiteness also marks space, and more importantly perhaps, how bodies occupy space. To put it another way, when we talk about bodily habit and its relationship to racial identity, we are talking about our orientation in space, our orientation to the world, our habitual occupation of space and the world. Sara Ahmed writes: "If the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness" (153). She continues:

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3 In Rory's utterances, the subtext of the L. A. riots of 1992 cannot be ignored. While the film's opening title places the narrative in 1987 in order to align the film with the onset of the AIDS crisis in America, the fact that the film was actually made *after* the riots makes it clear that Haynes was drawing on this event to underscore the themes of racial difference and space, themes that function as the all-pervasive subtext of *Safe*.

... spaces take shape through the habitual actions of bodies, such that the contours of space could be described as habitual ... spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them. ... To describe whiteness as a habit, as second nature, is to suggest that whiteness is what bodies do, where the body takes the shape of the action. (156)

What Ahmed is in essence tracing is the production and reproduction of whiteness through habit and the occupation of space. Spaces "take on" racial characteristics through habitual use and occupation (which is what Dyer was talking about), although in a white supremacist culture this occupation of space goes unremarked; in other words, white people do not have to confront their whiteness in white space: "spaces acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them" (157). But when bodies that are *not white* arrive on the scene, they are noticeable to white people, and people of color often experience feelings of discomfort in white space. What Haynes demonstrates in *Safe* is the other side of this equation: that when people of color enter white space (whether in the flesh or as an imaginary threat or in some kind of symbolic form), white bodies feel discomfort as well. I argue that the film suggests that the discomfort experienced by white bodies in such a scenario is due to the fact that *it is whiteness as habit which is exposed*.

Whiteness and subjectivity in *Safe*
What is so radical about exposing whiteness as a habit, as an embodied and racial identity? The answer to this is twofold: exposure forces some existential questions to emerge about white subjectivity, at the same time that exposing the habits of whiteness reveals white privilege itself. That is, Haynes moves whiteness from its position of invisibility (and thus power) to visibility, By calling attention to whiteness in this way, the film allows for whiteness' potential deconstruction by suggesting that it is the *habits of whiteness* (and their concomitant class, gender, and sexual aspects) that are making Carol sick.

Haynes' characterization of Carol points directly to one of the dilemmas of white subjectivity: the fact that a white racial identity is "empty," that calling attention to the whiteness of a person positions that person as a "subject without properties." Even though in America whiteness goes hand in hand with privilege, its status as a "universalizing" force (and not a particular identity) threatens the white subject with the specter of absence, with

the possibility that one does not actually possess much of a recognizable racial identity. I agree with Dyer that:

> White people have a colour, but it is a colour that also signifies the absence of colour, itself a characteristic of life and presence . .... To be positioned as an overseeing subject without properties may lead one to wonder if one is a subject at all. (Dyer 207)

This is at the crux of Carol's problems and a major source of her illness, as well as what drives her to escape from her environment in a quest to establish an identity and to attempt to articulate subjectivity. For in her home environment, Carol seems more like an automaton than a person: she barely speaks, and when she does, either mumbles unfinished sentences or repeats mindless clichés. Her lack of productivity is shown through the film's focus on her daily rounds of aerobic classes, lunches with other housewives, trips to the dry cleaners. She does not even take care of her own home. Thus the film positions Carol as the frail white woman terrified of brown bodies yet dependent on their labor. When she is shot in her home, the camera frames her as dwarfed by her lush environment, as if she is lost and adrift amongst all the material signs of privilege. In short, Carol has little personality, has little to do, and is framed as engulfed by a wholly white, wealthy environment, precisely the environment that she claims is making her sick. It is both the contents of that environment—projected onto household chemicals—as well as the white space itself (revealed by the encroaching "blackness") that prove toxic to Carol.

Haynes says about the film:

> I do think that the illness in *Safe* is the best thing to happen to [Carol]. It's the thing that kicks her out of unconsciousness, out of this unexamined life, and makes her begin to think about things in a completely different way and take some steps towards changing her life. (Taubin 32)

In other words, this illness, a reaction to the habits of whiteness, becomes the vehicle through which Carol seeks to identify and articulate subjectivity and meaning. Her failure to do so, however, is part of the film's queer counter-logic.

Interestingly, the film communicates this problem of subjectivity mainly through camera work, that is, through the technological manipulation of shots and *mise-en-scène*. For one, this is a performance-driven film. Carol

is in relentless focus and all characters besides her are peripheral. The camera lingers on Carol's expressions again and again, however providing very few close-ups. She is almost always shot from a distance or from a medium-close distance (Potter 138-9). Thus the camera work creates a kind of paradox: it focuses intently on a single character, and yet always keeps that character at a distance spatially and psychologically. The fact that Carol is in constant focus forces the viewers to judge her, pity her, empathize with her, dislike her, but nevertheless identify, encounter, and attempt to understand her. This attempt at identifying with or understanding Carol will only bring frustration, since the camera never closes the distance between spectator and character. I contend that this dichotomy of characterization—a figure in relentless focus, yet lacking affect and held at a remove—mimics the cultural logic of white subjectivity. It is as if our protagonist Carol, who ironically has little "character" at all, is an almost literal filmic representation of whiteness as tenuous, confused, and ultimately ill subjectivity.

That this troubled white subjectivity is coded female in *Safe* enhances the tenuous and troubled aspect of the existential crisis at the center of the film, for Carol is a dependent female whose EI is read by the family doctor as a contemporary form of hysteria. This is of course a fairly obvious commentary on the fact that at the onset of the AIDS crisis, the disease was not taken seriously by the U.S. government or medical establishment. Yet by also aligning EI with hysteria, the film highlights Carol's dependent subjectivity, her identity as defined in relation to husband and family, as well as, paradoxically, her privileged class and racial status: hysteria was a white, middle-class, female condition. Perhaps Haynes meant to draw a conceptual link along the axis of dependency: as Carol's gender definition is dependent upon her relationship to family and sexuality, whiteness, in all its supposed universality, is absolutely dependent upon (its own definition of) "blackness" to give it definition and power; thus all identity is relational. Yet the cultural logic of whiteness is premised on a disavowal of its own dependency on "blackness" as a way of structuring distributions of power, and this active refusal to acknowledge this reality of power is what creates the "sickness" at the heart of whiteness.

Safe's queering of mainstream film

Haynes' film meditates on the habits of whiteness and the existential crisis that it inspires in its protagonist. I argued earlier that *Safe* communicates

this crisis, that is, this horror of whiteness, quite viscerally to the audience. The film forces us to feel, in our bodies, the horror of whiteness when it is challenged by its environment. So how does *Safe* communicate this affective state to the spectator, especially considering that the main character— the one we more or less identify with—is played as emotionally flat?

First, the film subtly weaves in some elements of the horror genre, the modern avatar of "the cinema of attractions" that is premised on eliciting visceral, sensational responses from an audience. The opening scene I mentioned earlier is a case in point. The musical soundtrack produces an effect of foreboding, of something slightly sinister. Furthermore, the contemporary horror film often uses domestic space as its primary setting, where the home space is invaded by a murderous and sadistic force. As with *Safe*, in the horror film a space that should be safe is transformed into a site of fear and entrapment. That the camera takes the point-of-view of Carol in the establishing shot is also another genre move taken from horror, although we don't yet know whose point-of-view we are aligned with. In an interesting twist, this point-of-view turns out to be our protagonist's, not an antagonist's; horror often aligns us with the "eyes" of the murderer, as a way of both concealing his or her identity, as well as playing into the voyeuristic desires of spectatorship. This alignment of our gaze with Carol's will ultimately facilitate our identification with her. And it is the figure of Lester—a man staggering through the desert, completely covered from head to toe— whose sudden appearances are reminiscent of a monster, part human, part something else. He lives at the retreat center, the place in the desert where Carol goes to live in order to escape her home environment and be with others suffering the same illness. Lester's face is completely masked, thus his monstrousness; he is a representation of the extremity EI can lead to. These moments of horror are placed at intervals throughout the film, so as to shock us into horror just when we "forget" this dimension of the film.

Secondly, *Safe* manipulates the viewer's gaze through its invocation of cinematic "suture," meaning the process of forging identification in film spectatorship through various forms of cinematic significations as well as through what Kaja Silverman calls "the operations of ideology" (220). That is, *Safe* asks the viewer to align his or her gaze with that of Carol's, thus forcing some form of identification to transpire: this occurs through the camera work and relentless character focus I discussed above. As the word itself suggests, suturing requires a closing of the gap between the viewing subject and the main subject or character within the fictional world of the

film, a closing over or "facilitation" which allows the viewing subject to forget, in a sense, that this is a film, an artifice, a fictional world: this is one way in which mainstream film incorporates "the reality principle." As viewers, we long for suture, for in inserting the subject on-screen into recognizable roles and thus into ideology, this insertion allows us, too, to feel placated or secure, as mainstream film seems to re-enact the foundational or normative processes of identity formation (at least within a psychoanalytical framework.) Yet Haynes plays with our desires as spectators here: for the closing of this gap never occurs in *Safe*. The desire for suturing is invoked, but never completed.

The healing motif in the film can be read as a literal suggestion or visual manifestation of the psychological process of cinematic suturing. For to suture a wound is an integral first step in the process of healing; and this film is about a woman who seeks healing, desperately searching for both recognition of her illness and for a way to overcome it. The wound in the film is Carol's EI, a condition that is not recognized as a legitimate illness by the medical establishment. Yet beyond receiving a diagnosis, what remains even more elusive to Carol within the diegesis is the source of this illness/wound. While ostensibly the causal agents are the chemicals and fumes of her everyday life, beneath this lies the hidden subtext of her illness, revealed to us by the film's focus on Carol's daily habits (strongly marked by her class status): Carol's dissatisfaction with the habits of whiteness. Yet in failing to recognize this aspect of her illness, Carol does not heal.

In fact, at the very close of the movie Carol has seemingly sunk even deeper into illness and desperation despite her residence at the Wrenwood Center. What gives even more credence to the reading of Carol's illness as a literal representation of cinematic suture is the parallel the film establishes between Carol's inability or failure to heal (within the confines of the diegesis) and the film's refusal to complete the process of suture, to insert Carol back into recognizable forms of identity that would "soothe" the viewer: this could be in the form of returning to her husband and playing the dutiful role of wife or mother, thus playing into the ideology of patriarchy, or in the form of overcoming adversity, a typical narrative motif in mainstream film and conforming with the desire for closure.

Just as the film never shows us that Carol will "successfully" heal, the desire for suture is invoked yet never consummated. This is part of the film's subtle queer politics. Silverman claims that the process of suturing renders the viewing subject "supremely passive" (234). Haynes, in invok-

ing the desire for suture but never actually giving it to us as viewers, does not allow us to be passive, to be placated by a film's narrative, in other words, he does not allow the viewer to passively consume and thus reproduce normative ideology. Because we are so trained as spectators to expect suture, as it is an integral dimension of the success of mainstream films, we respond to *Safe* with a sense or feeling of deep unease, even nausea: thus the extreme irony of the film's title. Paradoxically, *Safe* achieves the power of its critique through its multiple "failures" in relation to mainstream cinema: the failure to heal, to construct a coherent subjectivity through suture, to reproduce normative structures.

Throughout the film, Carol's discomfort becomes our discomfort, or at least her discomfort becomes the dominant mood and affect of the film; one can say that this film's overarching mood is one of deep discomfort cut with flashes of horror. This is why critics like DeAngelis claim Haynes "'queers' ... mainstream narrative cinema." On the one hand Haynes uses the techniques of mainstream cinema, such as horror and suture, but on the other hand he "queers" these techniques by using them to encourage us to ask probing questions about whiteness, subjectivity, and viewing habits. This is a "queer" move because it upsets conventions; renders the cinematic experience of watching strange; and, through identifying with Carol, leads many spectators to uneasily acknowledge the privileged and relational dimensions of their own whiteness. Thus *Safe* attempts to viscerally communicate some of the central aims articulated by queer theory.

Conclusion

Haynes "queers" whiteness by revealing how, when the habits of whiteness are made visible by being "threatened," a conceptual abyss (sometimes somatised in the form of illness) might follow. To communicate this effectively, the film must simultaneously "queer" our film-viewing habits, putting us into a similar position as Carol. Like Carol's discomfort in her own skin and white surroundings, watching *Safe* leads us into a discomforting engagement with the act of film viewing. Just as whiteness proves to be a troubled and tenuous identity for Carol, in *Safe* our own role as spectator is rendered insecure and uneasy as a result of Haynes' careful manipulation of cinematic suture. In an interesting backwards dynamic, furthermore, producing the feeling of discomfort in relation to the racial aspects of space and identity holds the potential to expose whiteness as a habit. Thus the

affect of discomfort in *Safe* acts as *both* agent and effect. Such a dynamic use of "unease" in a cinematic setting leads us to question and examine our own reactions, emotions, and identity positions vis-à-vis racial identity and spectatorship. In this way the film opens avenues for critique rather than giving in to the urge to pacify the audience.

Safe's trajectory is towards Carol's complete dissolution of self. At the very end of the film, Carol, dragging an oxygen tank, appears exceedingly pale and moves into an "igloo" on the premises of the healing center, claiming the cabin she inhabited before is not "pure" or "safe" enough; of course, the igloo is painted white inside and out. In the context of the whiteness theme, then, Carol is actually more displaced at the very end of the film than she is at the beginning, delving deeper into white space despite her attempts at fleeing from the habits of whiteness. Hence Carol has failed to heal and "change her life," as Haynes put it. Yet I argued above that "failure" is part of the point of the film, and could be read as a critical comment on the habits of whiteness.

Ahmed writes that ideally, revealing the habits of whiteness

> … does not teach us how to change those habits and that is partly the point. In not being promising, in refusing to promise anything, such an approach to whiteness can allow us to keep open the force of the critique. It is by showing how we are stuck, by attending to what is habitual and routine in 'the what' of the world, that we can keep open the possibility of habit changes, without … simply wishing for new tricks. (165)

In other words, in revealing the habits of whiteness and allowing for failure, that is, allowing for discomfort, unease, unknowing, and the existential abyss, we cannot simply replace troubled white subjectivity with some new principle or conception of identity. Instead, in order to stay vigilant to habits and habit formations and their real effects on individuals and communities, it is important to avoid the creation of overarching principles and definitive answers to questions regarding identity and subjectivity. In an earlier published article about Todd Haynes' film *Far from Heaven*, I lauded Haynes for making whiteness visible, but then criticized him for failing to offer an alternative to what I called his queer white vision (*Jump Cut*). I no longer prescribe to such a view, for reading *Safe* through the lens of queer theory and the phenomenological approach of Ahmed, I now see the power of purposeful failure and of "not being promising." *Safe* is a film that on the one hand is able to expose the habits of whiteness and

the vicissitudes of identity more generally, and on the other hand refuses to provide answers and pacification; it is therefore quite a radical kind of filmmaking. Such filmmaking holds the potential to produce (and not simply reproduce) new conceptions of the ways in which our identities are always contingent and shifting, and most importantly, such a cinema can open (instead of closing down) avenues for conversation, thinking, and rethinking.

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