

# ***Poison* in the Sirkian System: The Political Agenda of Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven***

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Certainly Haynes's work does qualify as queer, but in the traditional sense of the word: unusual, strange, disturbing. (Wyatt, 2000: 175)

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. (DeAngelis, 2004: 41)

Todd Haynes is one of the most controversial directors of contemporary cinema. From his student film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), to his most controversial, *Poison* (1991), Haynes has continually challenged spectators' expectations by making the familiar appear unfamiliar and evoking a sense of the unusual, strange, or "queer" within everyday lives. Committed to an agenda of political filmmaking, Haynes's films not only subvert Hollywood's storytelling conventions and assail the spectator with challenging images (especially *Poison*) but also ask the spectator to acknowledge the alienation of minority groups from mainstream society.

It would, therefore, seem odd that Haynes should have recently directed *Far From Heaven* (2002), a homage to the melodramas of the 1950s. Unlike Haynes's other films -- *Superstar*, *Poison*, *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993), *Safe* (1995) and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) -- *Far From Heaven* is Haynes's first "commercial" success, popular with both mainstream audiences and critics.

This paper will argue that *Far From Heaven* is more than simply an affectionate pastiche of Douglas Sirk's classic melodrama *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Instead, *Far From Heaven* combines the social critique of the "Sirkian System" with the political agenda found in *Poison*. While Sirk employed cinematic irony and distanciation effects throughout his melodramas in order to expose the hypocrisy of American, bourgeois society in the 1950s, his films, especially *All that Heaven Allows*, offer a reassuring dichotomy between oppressive, hypocritical "society" and the freedom of a mythic, pastoral style "nature". Haynes, on the other hand, offers no such reassuring fantasy, but instead emphasises that the characters may feel suffocated by social pressures but yet still need that very society in order to maintain their sense of identity/identification. In accordance with the Haynesian agenda found in *Poison*, *Far From Heaven* draws distinct comparisons between the three leading characters: Cathy (the upper-middle class housewife), Raymond (the black gardener) and Frank (Cathy's closeted homosexual husband). Throughout *Far From Heaven*, Haynes exposes the similarities between the three characters, emphasising that, like the queer subject of Jonathan Dollimore's "perverse dynamic," their identities are the product of society's labelling subjects in accordance with hegemonic social scripts.

Finally, this essay will also consider Haynes's revision of the Sirkian heroine. While Sirk's leading ladies, such as Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) in *All That Heaven Allows*, are represented as trapped by social pressures, but still smouldering with suppressed romantic and sexual needs, this is not evidenced in Haynes's heroine -- Cathy Whittaker (Julianne Moore). Instead, the role of the Sirkian heroine -- especially her internal battle between social persona and her submerged, simmering sexuality -- is represented by Cathy's husband Frank Whittaker (Dennis Quaid). As Richard Falcon suggests, Dennis Quaid represents "the first time a man has played, with not a hint of campness, a full-on 1950s heroine." (Falcon, 2003: 15)

## **The Cinema of Todd Haynes**

Haynes first sprang to fame with *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* -- a remarkable film which represented the pop star's battles with anorexia nervosa using only a cast of Barbie and Ken dolls instead of actors. *Superstar* presaged themes which would feature heavily in Haynes's later work, such as the oppressive regimes of "normalcy" and the alienation of the vulnerable individual who does not conform to society's expectations. Stylistically, although *Superstar* used the Barbie dolls as an ironic comment on anorexic bodies, it was also "problematizing audience expectations and orientations" by challenging audience identifications and the traditional storytelling structures of mainstream cinema (Wyatt, 2000: 172). *Superstar* is remarkable for the way in which it initially distances the spectator through its seemingly ludicrous use of Barbie dolls as film characters but then gradually manages to stir emotional identification with the anorexic heroine.

However, Haynes's reputation as a radical, political director was secured by *Poison* -- a film triptych of seemingly unconnected stories entitled "Hero," "Homo," and "Horror" -- which ensured Haynes attracted more media "controversy" than most other directors have achieved throughout their entire career (Wyatt, 1998: 36-41). The film is also considered to be a showcase piece in the cinematic moment which Ruby Rich christened "Queer Cinema": a flurry of queer-themed films and videos which revised issues of minority representation and sexual subjectivity (Rich, 1992: 19). Examples of Queer Cinema included *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), *Edward II* (1991), *The Living End* (1992) and *Swoon* (1992).

These films attracted critical attention for various reasons. Firstly, they did not try to assert that queerness was good or bad; it simply was (Hayward, 2001: 310). Likewise, the films all "directly addressed a non-straight audience" and did not try to pacify homophobia with saccharine images of sanitised, desexualised gays and lesbians (Doty, 1998: 148). Stylistically, Queer Cinema made use of parodies and pastiches of other film texts -- notably classical Hollywood -- and was also a reaction to the pandemic of AIDS (Arroyo, 1993: 91-92).

Most importantly, Queer Cinema was a cinema of anti-identity politics. Unlike earlier gay and lesbian identity politics films (such as *Making Love* [1982] and *Longtime Companion* [1990]), which pleaded for the tolerance of a distinct gay minority, Queer Cinema challenged the actual sexual taxonomies themselves. For example, Arroyo points out that *My Own Private Idaho* "bypasses 1970s Gay Lib politics" altogether and shows how "terms like 'homosexual', 'gay' and 'desire' are sites of struggle." (Arroyo, 1993: 77) Similarly, Tom Kalin explains that his swooning flappers in *Swoon* are not actually "gay as we understand it" and "didn't think of themselves as homosexuals -- they were just sleeping together" (Kalin, quoted

in Okewole, 1992: 36, and Grundmann, 1993: 28). Therefore, Queer Cinema did not represent a distinct, quantifiable gay minority pleading to be accepted by a heterosexual majority, but instead questioned the suffocating labels of the heteronormative landscape itself. As Norman Bryson summarises, queer art was "not petitioning for membership in the club so much as investigating the ways the club itself has been profoundly determined by a compulsory heteronormativity." (Bryson, 1998: 3)

In this respect, Queer Cinema's anti-identity politics illuminated many of the themes of academic queer studies. Much of contemporary queer studies (especially the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Jonathan Dollimore) developed from the constructionist theories of philosopher Michel Foucault who argued that sexuality was a cultural construct (Foucault, [1978] 1998: 41-43). In other words, sexual identities are the result of culture labelling and classifying sexuality. Before the stigma of "the homosexual" was invented, people may have engaged in homosexual acts but did not claim an identity from those acts. Constructionists, therefore, view the concept of an "identity" as dependent upon the culture in which the subject is located. In the case of sexuality, constructionists would argue that people may be subject to a vast continuum of desires but it is only modern, Western, bourgeois culture which classifies these desires into a distinct hetero/homo binary (see Sedgwick, 1990: 85).

Jonathan Dollimore, building upon Foucault's thesis, asserts that the power of queerness/perversity is that it actually threatens from *within* rather than, as society would claim, from *without*. Dollimore argues that what is culturally classed as perversion is often "a displacement of disorder from within the dominant onto the subordinate" so that "the proximate is often *constructed* as the other." (Dollimore, 1991: 111, 33, my emphasis) In this respect, the power of dissidence to disrupt and dislevel lies in the fact that it is culturally linked to the inside -- the so-called natural or normal. Dollimore calls this "the paradoxical perverse." The power of perversity is that it "is very often perceived as at once utterly alien to what it threatens, and yet, mysteriously (is) inherent within it." (Dollimore, 1991: 121)

We see this theme of "the proximate *constructed* as the other" throughout Haynes's cinema but especially in *Poison* which, although composed of three seemingly unrelated stories, demonstrates the parallels which exist between three very different social pariahs, outsiders, or "queers." *Poison*'s narratives emphasise that it is only society which deems these characters to be strange or "queer" and marginalises them in order to maintain its social hierarchy. "Hero," told in the style of television documentary, relates the story of Richie -- a "strange" child who is supposed to have flown out of his bedroom window. It gradually becomes apparent that this child's "strangeness" is purely a product of malicious, small-town gossip because Richie "falls outside the dominant power structures." (Wyatt, 1998: 10) "Homo," visually indebted to the art of Pierre et Gilles, offers the Genet-esque story of a homosexual prisoner (the hero's name -- John Broom -- is a literal translation of Jean Genet) and, like Genet's works, challenges the relevance of the label "homosexual." (see Wyatt, 1998: 22) In Genet's prison there may be very few men who are homosexually identified yet there is much homosexual activity. "Horror," parodying the conventions of 1950s horror flicks, tells the story of scientist Dr. Graves who, having mistakenly ingested a distilled formula of the human "sex drive," develops a contagious, leprosy-like (metaphor for AIDS) disease. Dr. Graves is the most obvious metaphor for the "queer" character whom society objects as monstrous.

However, *Poison* is remarkable for the way it cuts across the three stories, forcing the spectator to draw comparisons between the three different outcasts. For example, "Horror" cuts from Dr. Graves ingesting the potion to the conservative suburbia of "Hero" and the voice over narration saying "the quiet community of Glenville was stunned." While the voice over refers to Richie's situation it could also apply to Dr. Graves's from the previous section (see Wyatt, 2000: 173). Yet, as Wyatt points out, Haynes is not merely engaging in cinematic gymnastics simply for the sake of formal innovation (Wyatt, 2000: 174). Instead, this experimentation with narrative conventions has a political agenda. By chopping between the three stories, Haynes is drawing connections between the different forms of prejudice which exist throughout societies: petty, small town gossip in "Hero" is compared to the violent homophobia of "Homo" and then to "burn-the-beast" McCarthyist hysteria vented against Dr. Graves in "Horror".

By connecting all three stories in such a fashion, *Poison* is asserting that the problem lies *not* with the individual but with the society which constructs the "outsider" as odd, queer or monstrous. The film highlights the dangerous power of mainstream culture's labelling, and thereby marginalising, those whom it considers deviant and strange. Similarly, the film's splicing together of the three stories challenges the spectator's own desire to regiment the characters because it forces a recognition of the comparisons and connections which exist between the three protagonists and a reconsideration of the relevance of social labels. In this respect, "queer" for Haynes is not simply restricted to alternative, sexual object choice or non-normative gender performativity, nor is it a more radical lesbian or gay politics. Instead, the queer subject is someone who, while actually stemming from within dominant regimes of society, is constructed, by social prejudice, as being outside. "Queer" is not opposed to the dominant regimes, forming a "them versus us" binary. Instead, "queer" is something which fissures normativity from within, exposing how the deviant or outsider is actually an integral part of that centre which would seek to ostracise it (see Dean, 2000: 245).

This essay will argue that although, on a surface reading, *Far From Heaven* "looks" very different from *Poison*, it is still exploring the same Haynesian themes, only in a more subtle fashion. In order to do this, *Far From Heaven* makes very explicit use of the cinematic irony developed by Douglas Sirk -- what critics now refer to as "the Sirkian system."

### **The Sirkian System**

*Far From Heaven* is an homage to Sirk's masterpiece *All That Heaven Allows* -- a film regarded as a prime example of the "woman's film" or "weepie" (Mulvey, 1987: 76). The German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder described *All That Heaven Allows* as one of the most beautiful films ever made and it was the inspiration, on both a visual and narrative level, for Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) (Falcon, 2003: 12).

Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* concerns a middle-class, East Coast family for whom the death of their father creates a problem. The mother figure -- Cary Scott (Jane Wyman) -- is still a sexually attractive woman who rejects the courtship of the socially acceptable (yet middle-aged and impotent) Harvey, in favour of a relationship with her much younger gardener -- Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson). Ron is not only considerably younger than Cary, but he also does not belong to her socio-economic class. Cary's choice of Ron over Harvey not only threatens the moral values of her children and the identity of the entire family, but also threatens to shake the bourgeois community of the town. *All That Heaven Allows*, however, plays out

these crises from Cary's point of view. It is Cary's internal turmoil (her choice between her family/social position and the man she loves) which provides the narrative tension.

Like other Sirkian melodramas, *All That Heaven Allows* offers a scathing critique of bourgeois, 1950s Eisenhower America. Although Sirk's melodramas were regarded originally as fluffy entertainment, their status was reconsidered by the new wave of film critics (notably those connected with the academic journals *Screen* and *Monogram*) who praised Sirk for his use of "ironic distancing" and "subversive construction of (...) irony." (Gledhill, 1987: 11) In one of the most important essays in the reconsideration of Sirk, "Distancing and Douglas Sirk," Paul Willemen argued that Sirk's melodramas held a subversive potential because Sirk's ironic use of editing, cinematography and mise-en-scène was attempting to achieve what Bertolt Brecht described as the *verfremdungseffekte*. (The *verfremdungseffekte* [V-Effekte] is usually translated as "distancing effect" but a better translation, closer to the original German, should be "making strange effect" as the V-Effekte is asking the spectator to re-evaluate the image, to reconsider something which s/he had previously assumed to be normal, by momentarily making the image appear strange, odd or queer.)

Willemen points out that we see this "making strange effect" in Sirk, especially through his characteristic use of mirror images which consistently emphasise the constructed nature of the characters' social persona. In one scene of *All That Heaven Allows*, there is a shot of Cary reflected in the mirror while her children crowd in behind. The image emphasises the social façade which Cary employs for the sake of her children. Willemen argues that Sirk's continual use of mirror imagery emphasises that the characters constantly "put themselves on show" and are "putting on an act." (Willemen, 1972/73: 132) As Robin Wood summarises, Sirk's mirror images stress "the unreality of the characters" who are "mere 'reflections' of human beings." (Wood, 1998: 26)

Similarly, Sirk also employed an expressionist use of colour. When Cary is with her children in the family home, she is in the world of harsh, cold, synthetic blues and greens, representing repression and loneliness. When she is with Ron, she is bathed in the warm autumnal hues of reds, browns and oranges. Supporting this expressionist use of colour was an (often) ironic representation of visual cliché in order to make a satirical point. For example, in *Written on the Wind* (1956) one of the opening shots represents Kyle Hadley's gaudy sports car drawing up outside the Doric columns of his family mansion. The image emphasises the family's "new" money through juxtaposing the vulgar sports car with the colonial-style mansion. Other famous Sirkian clichés include mink coats to symbolise success and the red light of a cabaret to suggest illicit sexuality in *Imitation of Life* (1959), while the phallic red sports car symbolises bad behaviour/promiscuity in *Written on the Wind* (see Willemen, 1971: 66). One of Sirk's most often discussed cinematic clichés is the final shot of *All That Heaven Allows* which represents a picture postcard image of a deer set against a snow background peering through the window at Cary and Ron. Is this simply an excruciatingly twee image symbolising the happiness of the couple, or is it to be read as a self-conscious cliché which "imbues the conclusion with unmistakable irony"? (Klinger, 1994: 38)

Sirk also employed an ironic use of editing. In various scenes of *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary is represented talking with her children, Kay and Ned. The narrative asserts that this family, at least from the viewpoint of the town's society, is a closely-knit family unit. However, Sirk continually frames Cary in such a way that she is never united with her children but always remains in a shot by herself (see Willemen, 1972/73: 131). Likewise, Sirk nearly always cuts on a moving image, thus evoking a sense of agitation and disruption

(Elsaesser, 1987: 53). All is not well beneath the pristine surface of this picture postcard, bourgeois family.

Sirk is also famous for challenging gender ideologies, especially through his unusual (by 1950s standards) representation of Rock Hudson's body. As both Steve Neale and Richard Meyer have pointed out, Rock Hudson's body is constantly "feminized" throughout the Sirk films (Neale, 1993: 18). Although Hudson's imposing height and massive frame are emphasised throughout the images, his body is very much "the object of a desiring, *implicitly female gaze*." (Meyer, 1991: 261) Meyer asserts that Hudson "submits rather more readily to the camera" than other male stars of his era, so that Hudson becomes "an object of erotic delectation but without the threat of male action." (Meyer, 1991: 261, 262) Similarly, one of the most famous Sirkian images -- and one of the most pointed critiques of female oppression in 1950s society -- is his image of a woman peering out through a house window. The frames of the individual windowpanes have a jail-like appearance so that the woman is represented as trapped within her social prison. In *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary waits by her window for the arrival of Ron and, shot from outside, resembles a prisoner (see Doane, 2004: 2).

Yet although Sirk painted a scathing critique of 1950s bourgeois society, he also offered the reassuring fantasy of an escape from social oppressions. Ron and Cary both retreat to the mythic, pastoral paradise of Ron's mill in the woods, which Jon Halliday describes as "the home of Thoreau and Emerson." (quoted in Mulvey, 1987: 79) *All That Heaven Allows* can be interpreted as offering the "daydream" of a flight from social constraints to the freedom of a life outside those social pressures (Mulvey, 1987: 79).

In contrast to *All That Heaven Allows*, Haynes's *Far From Heaven* offers a much more pessimistic view than Sirk. In keeping with the theme of his other films, Haynes does not offer the reassuring fantasy of fleeing from social pressures. Instead, *Far From Heaven* emphasises constructionist identifications in that all the characters are shown to be dependent upon their social environments, no matter how oppressive they are, for their sense of identification. Haynes also broadens the theme of oppression to include not just women's sexuality and gender issues but also problems of homophobia and racism.

### **Far From Heaven**

Haynes evokes the Russian Formalists' claim for the function of art in our lives, defamiliarization. In film after film, the director makes the familiar "unfamiliar" and, in the process, helps to restore our own sense of the unusual, unexpected and beautiful within the everyday. (Wyatt, 2000: 176)

Although Haynes's *Far From Heaven* is a tribute to Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, it also acknowledges Fassbinder's earlier homage to the film in *Fear Eats the Soul*, especially in the scene which represents Cathy and Raymond dancing in a dingy bar rather like Fassbinder's Emmi and Ali. Indeed, Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* can be viewed as an important "intertext" between *All That Heaven Allows* and *Far From Heaven* in that it replaces Sirk's working-class gardener with an "ethnic" Turkish "guest-worker" in Germany. Most importantly, *Fear Eats the Soul* is more pessimistic than *All That Heaven Allows*. In the film's climax, Emmi believes that she will nurse Ali back to health after his operation to treat his burst stomach ulcer, but the surgeon knows that Ali will be back in the hospital in another few months because foreign workers must toil under such stressful conditions. Emmi's hope of nursing Ali back to health is a hopeless dream.

Similarly, Fassbinder's *Fear Eats the Soul* does not offer the romantic image of escaping the constraints of society by fleeing to a pastoral idyll such as Ron Kirby's forest mill. Instead, *Fear Eats the Soul* emphasises that people are constricted by societal norms but that they can still forge a glimpse of happiness within that oppressive society. As Christian Thomsen summarises, Fassbinder "wants to show the possibilities open to human beings in an impossible society." (Thomsen, 1997: 143)

*Far From Heaven* develops these Fassbinder themes especially in its representation of the difficulties in maintaining socially unsanctioned relationships. But while *All That Heaven Allows* and *Fear Eats the Soul* represented only one taboo relationship (Cary and Ron and Ali and Emmi) *Far From Heaven* represents two relationships which are deemed socially unacceptable: Cathy and Raymond's friendship, which challenges racial barriers, and Frank's homosexual affair.

In *Far From Heaven*, Cathy Whittaker (Julianne Moore) -- a beautiful, upper-middle class, Connecticut housewife -- develops a close friendship/bond with her black gardener, Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert). The film's co-plot chronicles the difficulties that Cathy's husband, Frank Whittaker (Dennis Quaid), has in coming to terms with his sexual orientation. Unbeknown to Cathy, he has been frequenting gay bars after work and picking up random men. One night, Cathy, thinking that her husband is merely working late at the office, decides to bring him his dinner in a Tupperware container. (In a very Sirkian touch, the container even matches the shade of her dress.) However, when Cathy turns up at Frank's office, she finds him kissing another man. Frank decides to pursue a course of psychotherapy to "cure" him of his homosexual tendencies but this treatment takes its toll on his emotional and mental health and he starts to drink heavily. Understandably, this relationship between Cathy and Frank flounders altogether, and when Raymond discovers Cathy crying in her garden one afternoon, he suggests that they go for a drive to a pleasant lake in the country. Unfortunately, Cathy is seen with Raymond by one of her neighbours (the aptly named Mona Lauder) who starts vicious gossip about Cathy's "unseemly" relationship. This gossip eventually reaches Frank, who becomes angry, reading it as a slight on his masculine duties as a husband. Cathy asserts that there is nothing inappropriate about her friendship with Raymond but, nevertheless, decides to break off the friendship.

Frank takes time off from his work, due to his "ill-health" and brings Cathy on a holiday to Miami. While there, Frank meets a beautiful young man and starts a relationship with him. Back in Connecticut, Raymond's daughter Sarah is stoned by three white boys, who have heard the gossip about Raymond and Cathy. Not long after Frank and Cathy return, Frank tearfully informs Cathy of his affair and it is agreed that they should divorce. Cathy later learns of Sarah's attack and visits Raymond to see how the girl is recovering. Raymond informs her that he has decided that he must leave the town and is heading to Baltimore. In the final scenes, Cathy watches Raymond board a train.

Throughout *Far From Heaven*, Haynes deliberately employs all the Sirkian devices used to satirise 1950s bourgeois life. Immediately perceptible is the use of gaudy, vulgar colours symbolising bourgeois domesticity, contrasted with the softer, luscious hues of autumn. For example, the introductory scenes represent the autumnal streets of a well-to-do suburb -- beautiful with soft, natural browns, yellows and golds. This autumnal beauty is shattered by the jarringly coloured blue and white station wagon symbolising Cathy's domestic position of upper-middle class housewife and mother. Like Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, the lurid colours of red and green are used to represent environments of oppression and confinement --

such as the police station and household -- while the sites of freedom and happiness are connoted through soft browns, yellows and golds. The Sirkian colour schemes are also used to signify a tension between leading characters, as evidenced by the occasion when Cathy and her friend Eleanor have a disagreement and Eleanor's autumnal coloured clothes clash with the purple and green outfit worn by Cathy.

Similarly, Sirkian mini-alienation devices feature throughout the narrative. Characters are all represented framed by windows, emphasising their social captivity, trapped within the domestic prison of the bourgeois house. Likewise, the Sirkian/Fassbinder mirror images are employed continually, especially at moments of character crisis. For instance, when Cathy is asking Frank how his psychiatric "treatment" (to "cure" his homosexuality) is progressing, she is represented as a mirror reflection, her banal dialogue vainly masking her feelings of insecurity. The fear that she may be living a role and that her marriage is a charade is emphasised by the spectator seeing only a mirror image of Cathy.

Haynes also employs editing and cinematography in ironic ways as seen especially in the Christmas day scene when Frank suggests that he bring Cathy on a holiday to Miami. The editing ensures that Cathy and Frank are never united in a single shot but are represented separately. Likewise, the *mise-en-scène* features ironic imagery to emphasise the distance between Cathy and Frank. In one early scene, they are filmed (in deep focus) smooching on the bed while a rather tacky bedside ornament is positioned so as to be exactly between the couple thus rendering their frigid embraces even more remote and distant. Similarly, Cathy's supposedly "best" friend, Eleanor Parker, is always associated with the sterling silver -- she is initially returning Cathy's silver to her and when Cathy visits her at the end of the film she serves tea from a silver teapot. Yet this visual cliché is used in an ironic fashion as Eleanor is far from being a "sterling silver" friend, as evidenced by the lack of support she actually offers Cathy towards the end of the film.

However, while Sirk was attempting to critique the hypocrisy and pettiness of bourgeois, 1950s society, Haynes is not merely creating a glittering social satire. Instead, *Far From Heaven* follows a similar political agenda to *Poison* in its attempt to denaturalise identity. *Far From Heaven* draws deliberate parallels between all three leading characters by showing how Cathy, Frank, and Raymond are all the victims of different types of prejudice. While society inaccurately labels Raymond as an uneducated gardener, it also labels Frank as the "perfect" husband and father and Cathy as the ideal 1950s housewife and mother. The film continually exposes how the characters' "identities" are the result of dominant society labelling and thereby regimenting individual subjectivity.

For example, the narrative asserts that the townspeople can only view Raymond as a stereotypical black gardener -- an uneducated man who works with his hands. However, Raymond's environment is not really the garden at all but instead is the art gallery. The scene where Raymond seems most impressive is set in the local art gallery where he explains to Cathy his insightful interpretation of Miró. Raymond's intelligent discourse contrasts with the previous scene in which Cathy's friend Eleanor voiced homophobic clichés about how she did not like men who are "a little too light on their feet" -- such as the metropolitan art dealer coming to the exhibition. When, in the next scene, this art dealer finally appears, he is represented as grotesquely overweight, if not even obese, and undoubtedly not "light on his feet" at all. The point is that while the other characters, such as Eleanor, can only talk in superficial, unfounded gossip (which Sharon Willis describes succinctly as "ignorant



knowingness") Raymond is actually able to offer some intelligent conversation based on scholarship as opposed to silly prejudice (Willis, 2003: 159).

However, in a technique developed by Sirk, but more fully exploited by Fassbinder, the camera pans swiftly from Cathy and Raymond discussing Miró to the disapproving stares of the other (white) gallery patrons and, in a few seconds, "Cathy goes from enjoying the exhibit to *being* the exhibit." (Joyrich, 2004: 196) In true Fassbinder style, Cathy and Raymond are fixed by the gaze of the Other. Their sense of identification is shown to be dependent upon being recognised by the gaze of the other townspeople. The irony is that although Raymond is the only person who truly understands and benefits from the art gallery, because unlike the others he is not there to spread gossip and people-watch, the culture in which he is located does not recognise that identity. This scene directly references Fassbinder's cinematic style in *Fear Eats the Soul*, especially the scene where Ali and Emmi have just spent their first night together and are leaving the house. The spectator is shown Ali and Emmi shaking hands and then walking in opposite directions but, as they disappear, a reverse shot demonstrates that the spectator's gaze had also been Emmi's neighbour's who had been staring out of the window watching the couple (see Elsaesser, 1996: 60). The scene reminds the spectators that identity is forged by the cultural regimes, the gaze of the Other that reifies subjectivity.

Although *Far From Heaven's* Raymond is represented as trapped by the prejudiced gaze of the townspeople, Cathy and Frank are shown to be equally fixed by their cultural labels. If Raymond is the victim of racial prejudice, Cathy and Frank are trapped in their "picture-postcard" roles of happily married, middle-class couple. As far as the townspeople are concerned, Frank is a successful advertising executive with the perfect wife and family. Yet Haynes continually undercuts this image and Frank's relationship with Cathy is always represented in an ironic fashion, either through the use of editing (they are rarely ever framed together) or through some object of the *mise-en-scène* acting as a barrier between them -- such as ornaments, tables, chairs or the omnipresent television. After the scene in which Cathy discovers Frank kissing another man, the confrontation between husband and wife takes place in the Whittaker's sitting room. Here, Frank is filmed in long shot, transforming the sitting room into a prison with looming, dark shadows imprisoning Frank and evoking a jail-like appearance.

Yet when Frank finally meets the beautiful young man on holiday in Miami, the editing and *mise-en-scène* emphasise that this is the first genuine emotion Frank has been allowed to show during the film. In this scene, Haynes inverts the Sirkian mirror imagery by initially representing Frank and the young man as a mirror reflection but then panning the camera away from the mirror to represent Frank and the young man gazing at each other across the hotel room. This is one of the first moments in the film when Frank's actions have not been represented as a mere reflection or performance. Indeed, Willis points out that the encounter between Frank and the young man is a genuinely passionate moment and that the image of the young man caressing his silken, hairless chest and toned stomach is one of the first (if not only) erotic moments in the film (Willis, 2003: 161).

Similarly, the theatricality of Cathy's role is consistently emphasised throughout the film. One of the most Brechtian scenes in *Far From Heaven* occurs early in the narrative when Cathy is interviewed by a journalist from the local paper. The journalist, a ghastly woman called Mrs. Leacock, asserts that Cathy is the perfect housewife and mother -- a superb role model for the readers of the paper's society pages. Haynes exposes the superficiality of Mrs. Leacock's reading by employing all the Sirkian alienation devices to represent the artifice of

Cathy and Frank's marriage. Firstly, the chaste goodbye kiss between Frank and Cathy is photographed by the newspaper's photographer. Although Mrs. Leacock asserts that "candid views are always the best" the image of the goodbye kiss actually appears as the very opposite and seems theatrical and contrived -- rather like two stars posing for the tabloid press. Secondly, Haynes employs the Sirkian mirror images, again in the initial representation of Mrs. Leacock, emphasising that she, like her newspaper column, is only concerned with a mere reflection of reality. Thirdly, the camera pans from the advertising poster of a perfect housewife (Cathy) on the living room wall to the real Cathy, thus emphasising the stylisation of Cathy's "role" as housewife and mother. At one point during the interview, Cathy even mirrors the pose used in the advertisement for Mrs. Leacock's photographer. Therefore, while Cathy is perceived by society to be the perfect housewife and mother, Haynes uses the Sirkian devices to imbue the image with intense irony.

On occasions, Haynes actually represents the superficiality of Cathy's social identifications in a highly negative fashion. This is seen especially in relation to Cathy's treatment of her whining children. Although portrayed as the perfect mother, Cathy is more often telling her children to "be quiet" or brushing off their requests with the flippant "in a minute dear," such as when Cathy's daughter asks for help with lacing her new ballet shoes on Christmas morning. Willis summarises the situation by describing Cathy as "obtrusively, but indifferently, attentive to her children's and husband's health and hygiene -- physical and mental. But she is also abstracted and dismissive" and that the film constantly "exhibits just how oppressive life with Cathy is." (Willis, 2003: 164) Likewise Cathy's "sincere" support for Black Rights is questioned by the scene in which two NAACP campaigners call at the house requesting signatures and Cathy asks her maid, Sybil, to sign the form because she is too busy to pause for a couple of seconds to scribble her name on the form.

However, although Haynes exposes the artifice of Cathy's social persona, this is subtly different from the façade employed by the archetypal Sirkian heroine. One of the most beautiful aspects of Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (and a tribute to the acting talent of Jane Wyman) is that the film manages to convey a sense of Cary's sexuality and desire smouldering beneath her social façade. Throughout *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary's social persona of "middle-aged widow" is represented as smothering her actual or "true" identity. *Far From Heaven*, on the other hand, offers an entirely different image. Although Haynes consistently employs the Sirkian alienation devices in order to "make-strange" Cathy's role of housewife and mother and expose her identity simply as a role, it also stresses the *necessity* of these identifications for Cathy's subjectivity. From the start of the film, Cathy is represented as supremely content with her role of upper-middle class housewife and mother and, when she is interviewed by Mrs. Leacock, she emphasises -- with total sincerity -- that she has never actually wanted anything else other than to be a dutiful wife and mother. Cathy actually seems to be at her most confident and self-assured when she is "posing" for the newspaper photographers and performing the picture-postcard role of Connecticut housewife. As Willis argues, "Cathy is all external appearances." (Willis, 2003: 163) (There is an obvious, although ironic, inter-textual reference between Julianne Moore's performance of Cathy and her role in an earlier Haynes film, *Safe*, where she played Carol, an upper-middle class, 1990s Californian housewife. In *Safe*, Carol becomes extremely sick but doctors are unable to diagnose the cause of her unclassified illness. The film implies that the "cause" of Carol's illness is her suffocating, normative environment and that bourgeois, middle-class life is itself toxic.)

Therefore, in contrast to the relationship between Cary and Ron in *All That Heaven Allows*, Cathy and Raymond's relationship is *not* one of smouldering passion and, as Willis suggests, no tension -- either erotic or otherwise -- emerges between Cathy and Raymond (Willis, 2003: 164). Instead, what Cathy finds in Raymond is a sense of companionship and mutual respect. In answer to Willis's question -- "what draws Raymond to Cathy?" -- I should argue that Cathy and Raymond recognise their mutual captivity, two characters who feel imprisoned by their social roles -- however inaccurate those roles may be (Willis, 2003: 163). Certainly, Cathy does not evidence the burning desire which Cary felt for Ron in *All That Heaven Allows*. Indeed, throughout *Far From Heaven*, Cathy is represented as an extremely de-sexualised character, symbolised by her Doris Day style attire of full skirts supported by padded petticoats, indicative of girlish innocence. Cathy's outfits are often juxtaposed with the sleek pencil skirts and sexily fitted suits of Eleanor who, in contrast to Cathy, is represented as a very sexual woman indeed. During Cathy's luncheon party, Eleanor deliberately shifts the conversation to sexual gossip. While Eleanor is intrigued by the sexual details, Cathy is shown to be shocked by the amount of sex her girlfriends' husbands demand. The implication is that Cathy has never questioned the lack of sexual activity in her own sham of a marriage. Sexual desire is not on Cathy's agenda. Instead, her goals are shown to be wholly implicated in maintaining the socially constructed role of housewife and mother. She is quite literally "a force charged with maintaining domestic stability and boundaries." (Willis, 2003: 165)

Therefore, when Cathy and Frank eventually break up, Cathy accepts his decision with a cool dignity. In fact, she is shown to be more hurt by Frank trying to arrange the signing of the divorce papers on a day which coincides with her "car pooling" schedule. With a rather poignant sigh, Cathy remarks that Frank never could remember her car pooling days. The implication is that she is most hurt not by Frank's rejection of her body but that he failed to recognise the various activities which comprise her social identity -- Mrs. Frank Whittaker, the perfect wife and mother. Cathy's subjectivity is dependent upon recognition of her social position and she is happiest when playing the role of housewife and mother for the press or being seen to be the perfect hostess for her husband's business clients. When, at the end of the film, Cathy sobs her heart out on the bed, her tears are the result of having lost her social position and not, as with previous Sirkian heroines, for the loss of her love interest.

Therefore, while Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* represented fantasy moments in which the heroes escape the pressures of society, Haynes, by contrast, does not allow any such solace in *Far From Heaven*. This is most clearly emphasised by comparing the "woodland" scenes in *All That Heaven Allows* with *Far From Heaven*'s corresponding sequences. In *All That Heaven Allows*, one of the happiest moments represents Ron and Cary retreating to Ron's woodland house -- an old mill by a stream which represents "an alternative and idyllic lifestyle." (Mulvey, 2003: 41) By contrast, *Far From Heaven*'s corresponding scene in which Raymond takes Cathy into the woods offers "no suggestion of a marginal culture or Thoreauesque ideal in which they can find refuge." (Mulvey, 2003: 41) Instead, there is only the picture postcard image of a woodland autumnal scene -- the tourist site of "New England in the Fall."

Throughout *Far From Heaven*, Haynes makes it clear that there is no idyllic existence beyond the confines of traditional society. Cathy and Raymond do not retreat to a mythic woodland paradise where they are free from social pressures and constraints. Instead, like *Poison*, the narrative asserts that there cannot be a subject without the cultural regimes which both inscribe but also reify subjectivity. Cathy has to realise that there is no future with

Raymond because, try as she might, there is no escape from the confines of society's taxonomies. This is emphasised rather poignantly in the scene following the woodland visit where Raymond takes Cathy to a bar patronised by only Black customers. There, the sense of prejudice and discrimination is reversed. Whereas Raymond is the object of the disapproving gaze in the art gallery, now Cathy is seen as the outsider who is suspicious and unwelcome. Haynes again employs the Fassbinder pan shot showing the other customers fixing Cathy with their disapproving stares. The message is very clear from such an image: Cathy and Raymond are both confined by their specific social roles.

### **Queer Transgression**

However, although the three characters are represented as constricted by their social positions, these characters are problematic for society because they challenge their specific roles. Like the three "queer" characters in *Poison*, the characters in *Far From Heaven* fissure normativity from within. For example, as emphasised by the gallery scene, the town's problem with Raymond is not that he is black but that he is transgressing his socially ascribed boundaries. Raymond's interest in Miró demonstrates that he is not simply the fantastical image of a "natural man" removed from social conventions, the black man or savage or, what Kobena Mercer terms, an "ontologized phallus." (Mercer, 1994: 174) Instead of being the stereotypical "black gardener" -- who is expected to be illiterate and coarse -- Raymond is represented as cultured, articulate and educated, especially in his critical appreciation of art. In this respect, Raymond represents the "queer" Haynesian hero: a character who problematises the constraints of society's labels. Raymond is problematic because he exposes the label of "black, uneducated gardener" as being no more than a socially prejudiced label.

In this respect, *Far From Heaven* is not without its joyful moments and the film actually offers a "happy" ending in the representation of Frank and his male lover. While Frank is represented throughout the narrative as imprisoned by the *mise-en-scène*, this image changes by the end of the film when Frank is with his new male lover. In this scene, Frank calls Cathy from a hotel room to arrange a meeting with their lawyer to further the divorce proceedings and, after the telephone call, the camera pans back to reveal the décor of the hotel room and Frank's beautiful lover lounging on the bed. Despite its tawdriness, the colour scheme of the hotel room echoes the autumnal colours which have featured as idyllic fantasies throughout the film, such as the woodland lake where Raymond takes Cathy. Therefore, although Willis argues that the "flat, superficial" nature of Frank's lover suggests that "Frank will not live happily ever after," I should argue that the colour scheme suggests an image of happiness which has been lacking throughout the rest of the film (Willis, 2003: 162). Unlike the Whittaker's house, with its lurid colours filmed through filtered lighting, the hotel room echoes the luscious autumnal hues. The implication is that Frank and his male lover may actually have found some sort of momentary happiness (although maybe not a "happy-ever-after") in the midst of society's oppression but, unlike *All That Heaven Allows*, these characters have not retreated to a mythic pastoral. Instead, the imagery asserts that the characters have found some transient happiness within the dominant culture. In this sense, *Far From Heaven* echoes the Genetesque theme which so inspired Haynes's *Poison*. Transgression does not actually attain anything as it still leaves the transgressor socially positioned and subject to further labelling from the dominant ideology. Therefore, Genet's oeuvre has always exalted places of oppression -- such as prisons -- because the prisoner, through the power of love, can paradoxically turn that site of oppression into something special. Arguably, this is suggested by the happy moment between Frank and his new lover. Haynes shows that there is no escape from the confines of traditional culture but that

the "queer" subject is one who challenges the boundaries from within the paradigms of society.

## Conclusion

*Far From Heaven* is one of Haynes's most accomplished films. It maintains (and develops) the Haynesian themes: alienation of minorities, exposure of identity as a social label and the "making strange"/queering of conventionality. Yet, unlike *Poison*, *Far From Heaven* employs a popular and highly entertaining film genre. Instead of assailing the spectator with difficult and discomfiting images, as was the case with *Poison*, *Far From Heaven* represents its political agenda with more subtlety. On one level, *Far From Heaven* can simply be viewed as an affectionate homage to the melodramas of the 1950s, offering the pleasures of beautiful costumes, 1950s décor and expressionist/symbolic use of colour. Yet on another level, *Far From Heaven* can be read as developing many of the Sirkian themes in accordance with the political agenda of queer cinema. Rather than simply satirising bourgeois society and representing characters smothered by normative roles, *Far From Heaven* asserts that identity *cannot* exist beyond the confines of normative culture. Although the characters' identifications are the products of social prejudice, the narrative asserts the difficulty in rejecting these limiting labels of identity. Therefore, *Far From Heaven* does not offer the reassuring fantasy moments of *All That Heaven Allows*, in which the heroes retreat to a woodland paradise but instead asserts that subjectivity cannot exist in a romantic vacuum, removed from established cultural paradigms.

Yet, like the "queers" in *Poison*, *Far From Heaven*, demonstrates that the queer character is problematic because he/she challenges normative ideologies from within. Like *Poison*, *Far From Heaven* shows that the problem lies *not* with the individual but with society which "constructs" the "outsider" as odd, queer or monstrous. Indeed, *Far From Heaven* can, like *Poison*, be read as "calling to action all those placed on the margins by dominant society, and questioning why those margins exist in the first place." (Wyatt, 1998: 48) The film not only offers a "sustained critique of the dominant ideology" but also suggests a "uniquely queer perspective on human existence" and, like all of Haynes's films, challenges "clichés about representation, sameness and difference and identity." (Wyatt, 2000: 174; De Angelis, 2004: 42; Landy, 2003: 123) While Sirk offered the romantic daydream of all that heaven allows, Haynes represents a darker image which really is far from heaven.

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