Far from Heaven,
Safe,
Superstar:
The Karen Carpenter Story

Three Screenplays

by Todd Haynes

Grove Press
New York

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Published simultaneously in Canada
Printed in Canada

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Haynes, Todd.
[Screenplays. Selections]
Far from heaven ; Safe ; and, Superstar : three screenplays / Todd Haynes.
p. cm
ISBN 0-8021-4027-0
1. Carpenter, Karen, 1950–1983—Drama. 2. Anorexia nervosa—Patients—Drama. 3. African American men—Drama. 4. Race relations—Drama. 5. Women singers—Drama. 6. Suburban life—Drama. 7. Housewives—Drama. 8. Gay men—Drama. I. Title: Safe. II. Title: Superstar. III. Far from Heaven. IV. Title.
PS3558.A8627A6 2003
812'.54—dc21 2003049077

Grove Press
841 Broadway
New York, NY 10003

03 04 05 06 07 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Three Screenplays: An Introduction

Godard once said that photography is the truth, and film is the truth twenty-four times a second. Later, a character in one of Fassbinder's films would reply that film, in fact, *lies* twenty-four times a second. And since "everything is lies, it is, therefore, also the truth."[1] From the beginning, it seems, this question—or curse—of authenticity has loomed over the history of film like a vague religion, forming divisions of faith among filmmakers and viewers alike. While Godard and Fassbinder were both Europeans schooled in Marxist politics and Hollywood cinema, the tools they chose to tell their stories couldn't be farther apart. For Godard political content is presented directly—"truthfully"—and is used to dismember his narratives. For Fassbinder, it's the straits of narrative itself—the implicit social critique he finds, for example, in popular melodrama—that illuminate his social and political concerns. For whatever truths might be conveyable on film, they are still subject to a machinery of production that must remain hidden: a man behind the curtain, calling the shots. Disguise, in other words, is built-in. Like Oscar Wilde wrote, in the era of cinema's birth: "Give the man a mask and he'll tell you the truth." Which is why, I suppose, despite my infinite regard for the work of both these directors, I too have always believed in the lie.

Each of the three scripts collected in this edition reflects a strong interest in popular form, combined with a strong desire to

1. Lurtz in *The Third Generation*, 1978.

invert it. All are stories about women: *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story,* the long-suppressed[2], true-life pop tragedy conceived for a cast of Barbies; *Safe,* the cryogenic "disease movie" about a woman who becomes allergic to the twentieth century; and *Far from Heaven,* a domestic melodrama that rekindles the 1950s of Douglas Sirk. These are my women's films—two features and an oblong short—that belong to one another as much as they do to me. In a way they are sisters, and if there exists between them a sisterhood of sorts, aligning them as stories about women or even experiments in form, the imprint of feminism would clearly be at its core.

From my first encounter with the invigorating notion of gender as a product of ideology, feminist theory has left an indelible mark on my own critical—and creative—thinking. As far as I knew, at least until the emergence of AIDS in the late 1980s, there was really no study of homosexuality that could rival the complexity—and diversity—of feminist thought, from its incorporation of Marx and Freud to its reexamination of film and society. For me, everything that I questioned about what it meant to be a man—and how much my sexuality would perpetually challenge those meanings—could be found in arguments posed by feminists. What can I say? I identified.

And identification, for all three of these films, is critical. Not merely my own identification—with Karen, or Carol, or Cathy—but identification itself: that compulsive narrative drive to inhabit what we see (which always seems to function best when we're not noticing). Identification has many official definitions, most of them deriving from the psychoanalytic model, where the ability to identify—to see ourselves outside ourselves—is what first determines the notion of "self." And many theorists of film have applied this model to the experience of watching movies. Identification, they suggest, not only connects us to the protagonist onscreen but, at a deeper level, through our implicit understanding of cinematic language, to a basic sense of ourselves as cohesive subjects. And formally speaking, most films attempt to do just that. Our identification is

2. *Superstar* has been out of legal circulation since 1990, subject to a cease and desist order pertaining to unauthorized use of the Carpenters' music.

aligned with the mobility and success of the central character, so that we feel affirmed by their very centrality. The adherence of these conventions in classic Hollywood films to various social (and sexual) norms has been the focus of a wealth of feminist writing on the subject. So to whatever degree identification is organized around patriarchal lines, most forms of narrative film resolve themselves around some kind of stability, some resumption of social "order," as a reward for our investment.

But what would happen if this procedure were interrupted, if the narrative gears subsumed by our identification were quietly revealed? Would blowing their cover necessarily destroy our emotional connection? Or is our need to identify strong enough to bend, strong enough even to allow a glimpse of *how* we're feeling what we're feeling—even while we're feeling it?

In all three of these films, each of which inflicts upon its heroine a dangerous upheaval, identification itself is put in peril. In each case there is something that stands between the central character and ourselves, some impediment to free immersion that clogs the system and turns identification into each story's silent wager. Perhaps the most emblematic example of this occurs in *Superstar,* in which the use of dolls—combined with many viewers' ironic regard for the Carpenters—pretty much rules out any expectation of a deep investment. But investment was precisely the point. And somehow I felt that by carefully embracing a well-known genre—in this case the rise-and-fall, pop star biopic—the desire to identify could even succumb to an ensemble of plastic. So it was a testament to the power of narrative form, which sets the gears of identification in motion, combined with the viewer's intense desire to comply, that *Superstar* was able as a viewing experience to overcome its own conceit and seduce people into feeling.

Urged on by these kinds of reactions, *Safe* proceeds to challenge identification at almost every level. But it, too, is placed in deceptively familiar terrain. This time it's the "disease movie" that sets the stage, already a genre far more closely associated with women than the "star story" of *Superstar* and usually in the context of television. What's fascinating about the "disease movie" is how narrative resolution—so often the queasily redemptive

variety—is contingent on the central character's coming to accept her illness, "finding herself" in the meaning it provides. Illness therefore equals enlightenment: It bears a message. So while *Safe* pays allegiance to these kinds of issues, there's no question that the tone of the film, the coolness of its style and the inaccessibility of its central character, unsteadies the "disease movie" genre (at times it feels more like a domestic horror flick). And this puts everything the film might be "saying" into question. Suddenly every detail onscreen is offered up as a clue to its meaning, allowing seemingly innocuous events to take on great significance (a black couch in a house, a white house on a hill). And Carol White—a character who lacks all the charisma of a protagonist—isn't much help, at least in telling us whose side this film is really on. We want her to make that inner breakthrough, the one we know is coming, but something tells us we can't take anything at face value. And all this anxiety around meaning just goes to show how much our narrative relaxation is rooted in a sense of moral certainty.

Still, in the end, our contract with the "disease movie" is honored. Carol White identifies with the moral explanation of her illness, blames herself for it, and is applauded. She says I love you in the mirror. And just as the film quietly obeys its redemptive genre, so Carol White follows the rules. This is how *Safe,* like all movies, tells its lies. The difference is that *Safe* lies on purpose. Somehow it lets you know that it doesn't believe in the rules it is bound, nevertheless, to obey.

But the narrative form or genre that enacts the most consistent and beguiling self-critique, though—and of which Fassbinder made such cunning use in his cinematic index of German society—is the melodrama. All three of these films can be seen as melodramas. Each is a story of a woman struggling within the constraints of domestic life, each of whom surrenders, in one way or another, to its authority. And each are films that articulate emotion through the corridors of style. I suppose it was in admission of my own high regard for Hollywood melodrama that I first conceived *Far from Heaven* as a tribute to Douglas Sirk. This was my chance to study the intricacy and boldness of classic form; the lush, sculptural style and sublime emotionality of films like *All that Heaven Allows* (1956), *Written on the Wind* (1957), and *Imitation of Life* (1960). As a result *Far from Heaven* is probably the film of mine that "follows the rules" more strictly than any of the others, rules for emotional engagement that have all but expired—yet which elicit in the end the most directly emotional effect. Its ability to engage the feelings of such a wide range of viewers (from cineastes to the elderly) took me largely by surprise. How could a film that so completely ignores contemporary styles of naturalism, and that resurrects the most discredited of dramatic forms, ever be trusted by a largely jaded contemporary culture?

I think part of the answer lies in a trait one might think uncharacteristic of melodrama—particularly the classic Hollywood variety—namely its perceptiveness. For, despite whatever we might imagine as "melodramatic" content, these are really just stories about people falling out of love, about marriages and families in struggle, about social regulation and desire. In other words, these are stories about most of *us.* And unlike more respected dramatic forms that hinge on catharsis and breakthrough, classic melodrama is not about overcoming. The women in these films never transcend their conditions, either in thought or in deed. Rarely are we even sure what it is they learn from their struggles. That's because, despite its narrative overdetermination and simplicity, classic melodrama is not prescriptive. If it has a message to proclaim it's always, at the very least, a supremely mixed one.

What's more, that sense of interiority, so essential to identification, is not what draws us in to melodrama. The heroines of Douglas Sirk do not direct our gaze; the camera stands outside them. Instead, classic identification is replaced by a broader awareness, a recognition—at times, a deeply emotional one—of the social dynamic at work. This is why in *Far from Heaven* the love and pain depicted is almost too big for any single character to contain. So it spills into the music, the wardrobe and decor, the colors and shadows on the screen. The style allows expression to be spread into nonverbal arenas, displacing the desire and villainy of the characters onto, literally, the walls and clothes—even the narra-

tive forms—they inhabit. This is how, as Mary Ann Doane writes, "mise-en-scene, music, and lighting absorb the function of signifying interiority,"[3] and how, in this invocation of the social sphere, the best melodramas reveal how social—how "political"—our feelings can be. Perhaps by honoring the tender muteness of Sirk's films (and his characters), their insistence on showing versus telling, combined with their even lack of moralism, *Far from Heaven* is able to elicit our concern with the same respect it extends to its characters.

I agree with Fassbinder who said, "Revolution doesn't belong on the cinema screen, but outside, in the world." To provide an audience with a solution—to give them the revolution—is to deprive them of the necessity of creating their own. "Never mind if a film ends pessimistically," he said, "if it explores certain mechanisms clearly enough to show people how exactly they work, then the ultimate effect is not pessimistic." I've always felt that viewers of film have extraordinary powers: They can make life out of reflections on the wall. Perhaps it's in the spaces we allow them to reflect (upon) themselves that films encourage these powers of transformation to continue—even after the movie is over.

Finally, it's impossible, while referring to the films these scripts ultimately became, not to acknowledge the indelible presence of Julianne Moore in the two feature films. The spell of her performances in *Safe* and *Far from Heaven* now seems to prefigure every word on the page, every image conjured. Indeed, her contribution is central to whatever esteem either film has received and—along with my producer, Christine Vachon—to their realization into films at all. And for all the performances these pages summon, and all the images, I am indebted to a vast assortment of extraordinary artists and collaborators without whom these experiments in shape and feeling would surely have failed.

—Todd Haynes
Portland, Oregon

3. Mary Ann Doane, "Observations on the Cinema of Todd Haynes," delivered at a panel at Brown University, April 2003.

Far from Heaven: Director's Statement

The fifties-era melodramas of Douglas Sirk and Max Ophuls have always astounded me. The titles alone—*All That Heaven Allows, The Reckless Moment, Written on the Wind, Imitation of Life*—suggest a cinema of sweeping arpeggios and transcendent artifice, which of course they deliver—in spades. But beneath their lush, teeming surfaces are claustrophobic stories of disillusionment and resignation, of women locked up in houses who emerge, in the end, as lesser human beings for all they surrender to the ways of the world. "The subjects of melodrama," writes film theorist Thomas Elsaesser, "are never up to the demands their lives make on them. Small-town notions of dignity always win out over desire."* The sheer persistence of a dramatic form so exclusively focused on domestic woe, he writes, "affirms popular culture's refusal to understand social change in any other terms than highly emotional ones." In other words, suffering is more in keeping with reality.

Lovers of melodrama—and those who write about it in film journals—are not generally interested in conventional depictions of reality; rather, in reality as a by-product of something else. Something that happens between the person in the audience and their recognition of something larger and stranger up on-screen. Some believe that melodrama's heightened gestures and wild compression trigger an emotional understanding, separate from the actual

*Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Monogram*, no. 4 (1972), pp. 2–15.