
Cinematic/Sexual Transgression: An Interview with Todd Haynes

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Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Spring, 1993), pp. 2-8

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1212898>

Accessed: 22/06/2010 15:21

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Director Todd Haynes' fame rests on the cult status of his short film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* and on the Grand Jury prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival for his first feature, *Poison*. While these works are exciting and uncompromising, Haynes is probably better known within the mainstream press for the controversy surrounding the release of *Poison*: Reverend Donald Wildmon and his American Family Association launched a campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts based, in part, on Haynes' film, which had received a small completion grant from the NEA. Influenced by a misleading review in *Variety* and without having seen the film, Wildmon condemned *Poison* as pornography, in the process creating unexpected publicity for the film and probably leading to wider distribution than it might otherwise have had.

The name recognition, controversy, and the power of the film itself have all contributed to making Todd Haynes one of the major proponents of the "New Queer Cinema," a term coined in a 1992 *Village Voice* piece by B. Ruby Rich to describe the renaissance in gay and lesbian film-making represented by Haynes, Jennie Livingston (*Paris Is Burning*), Gus Van Sant (*My Own Private Idaho*), Tom Kalin (*Swoon*), Gregg Araki (*The Living End*), and Laurie Lynd (*R.S.V.P.*), among others.

After graduating from Brown University's program in Art/Semiotics in 1985, Haynes co-founded Apparatus Productions with Barry Ellsworth and Christine Vachon (producer of both *Poison* and *Swoon*). Apparatus Productions was set up to channel grants to emerging film-makers who were not well served by the traditional funding sources. As Haynes comments, "We wanted to preserve the form of short film-making, and make it something really exciting that wasn't just a stepping stone for feature film-making." Under Apparatus, several films which directly question narrative and cinematic convention were completed, including *He Was Once* (Mary Hestand, 1990), *La Divina* (M. Brooke Dammkoehler, 1990), and *Oreos With Attitudes* (Larry Carty, 1991), (all currently distributed by Zeitgeist Films in New York).

In 1987, Haynes made *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, a mock documentary short telling the tragic tale of pop star Karen Carpenter's rise to fame and her eventual demise due to anorexia

Justin Wyatt

Cinematic/Sexual

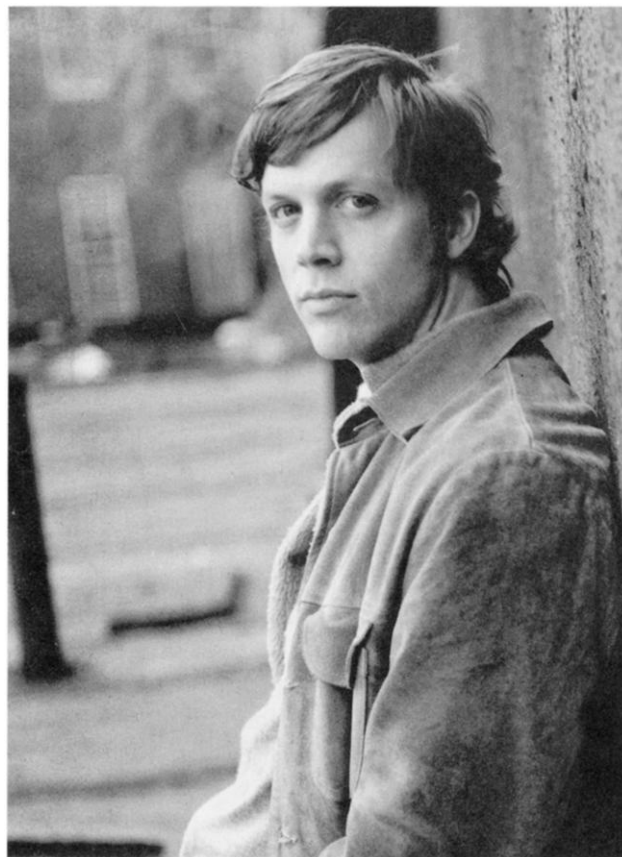
An Interview

nervosa. Filmed entirely with a cast of Barbie and Ken dolls, the film moves from being a miniaturized star story to a moving depiction of a young woman overwhelmed by her family and patriarchal structures. The film problematizes character identification: while the audience may initially laugh at the family drama enacted by dolls, it is ultimately wrenched—by the death of a Barbie doll from an eating disorder. On another level, Haynes is interested in investigating the ideological power of pop icons, and, in fact, invokes the most saccharine icons of the 1960s and 1970s, Karen and Richard Carpenter, placing them amidst an array of other icons from the same period (Dionne Warwick, the Brady Bunch, and Olivia Newton-John, among others). Legal injunctions from the Carpenter family halted distribution of the film, although it has a strong life in the underground and remains a cult favorite.

Poison, produced on a Barbie-sized budget of \$250,000 and also distributed by Zeitgeist, shifts, dramatically and aesthetically, between three developing stories: "Hero," a quasi-documentary about

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patricide; “Horror,” a black-and-white, broadly drawn horror/science-fiction parody about a scientist who becomes a leprous sex killer after ingesting the “sex drive” in liquid form; and “Homo,” an elaborate homage to Jean Genet, telling of a prisoner’s romance and obsession with a fellow inmate. In cutting between the three developing stories, Haynes forces the viewer to seek connections and resonances between each story and its characters: between the enigmatic child Richie Beacon, the alienated scientist Dr. Graves, and the resolute prisoner John Broom.

Haynes’ choice of cutting between the stories runs the risk of destroying the viewers’ attachment to and understanding of any one of them by shifting to the next. The outcome of this process is, however, central to Haynes’ work. Indeed, as meaning is destabilized through this structure, the effect reflects the invisible center of *Poison*’s “documentary,” Richie Beacon. The child, constructed through contradictory reports from the neighborhood “witnesses,” remains an enigma. Just as the viewer begins to understand him, the definition of the

character shifts; this process is repeated time and time again. For Haynes, the same shifting process operates through both *Poison* and *Superstar*, so that the films can be described as both camp and not, narrative and not, gay and not.

The experiments with narrative, character, and structure evident in *Superstar* and *Poison* promise to be continued in Haynes’ next feature, *Safe*, scheduled to be filmed in the summer of 1993. *Safe* considers a middle-class housewife in the San Fernando Valley whose life is torn apart by an escalating chemical sensitivity. As Carol White starts reacting allergically to more and more elements within her environment, her ability to consume is increasingly diminished. This problem ultimately threatens the very structure of her identity and, of course, the audience’s connection to the character. As Haynes describes it, “*Safe* is a film about danger, from the unthinkable dangers that communicate themselves through the objects and affections of our daily lives to the dangerous and misleading ways in which our identities are constructed.”

Interview

JUSTIN WYATT: *Has your academic background had a bearing on your film-making practice?*

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

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

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

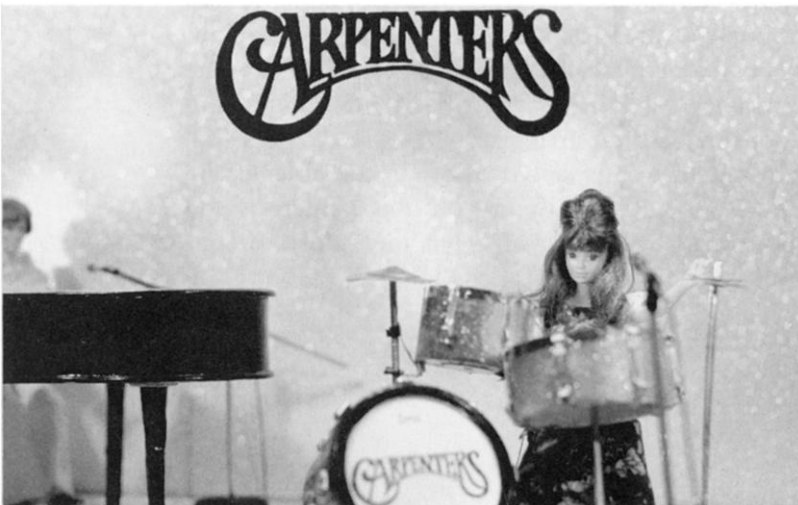
has all these different voices and intercuts all these different realities. We started to shoot it in tenth grade, and we worked on it for two years. The entire second year was devoted to the sound track. We started in Super-8, but by the end of the year we had blown up all the tracks to 35mm. We were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

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

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

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

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story





I learned that people will identify at the drop of a hat [laughs] at almost anything. I think that it's an essential need when we go to a film, and a really exciting need to know about and not simply fulfill. There's this aspect of creating narratives in a commercial sense that I hate, and you see it in so many ways in movies over and over and over again: this need to create a likable central character with quirks and interesting things to say. It's like this awful sick need to replicate yourself and make a double in the creation of narrative. It's a horrible mirroring of the need to affirm who we are through stories and make ourselves big and huge on the screen. I hate it and yet, at a very basic level of narrative, I think that it happens. So I'm always caught in the dilemma of feeling that it's still absolutely necessary to work with stories, because they are a weird mechanical and emotional hybrid that we all react to. There is an incredible potential since people go in with expectations that you can meet part way, and then alter—because you have them, they're emotionally engaged.

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

I think that there is real stylistic play in both *Superstar* and *Poison*. In a way, it's the most on-the-surface example of the films' element of fun and play. I think in *Superstar*, more than in *Poison*, the way style is played with is what makes you laugh. It's this absurd miniaturization of the bourgeois success story, and you laugh at how all the obligatory elements of the 1970s family are miniaturized and present in the film and how it follows the genre

of the star film with Barbie dolls. I think what is actually pleasurable about the film is the identification which you finally achieve with Karen through all the distancing. In a way, the play of style can be an alienation. You laugh, but you're not really interested in the story or the ideas or the emotions. It's not helping you identify with the film; in fact, it's keeping you outside of it in ways that provoke as much thought as the weird feeling of having identified with a plastic doll.

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

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

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

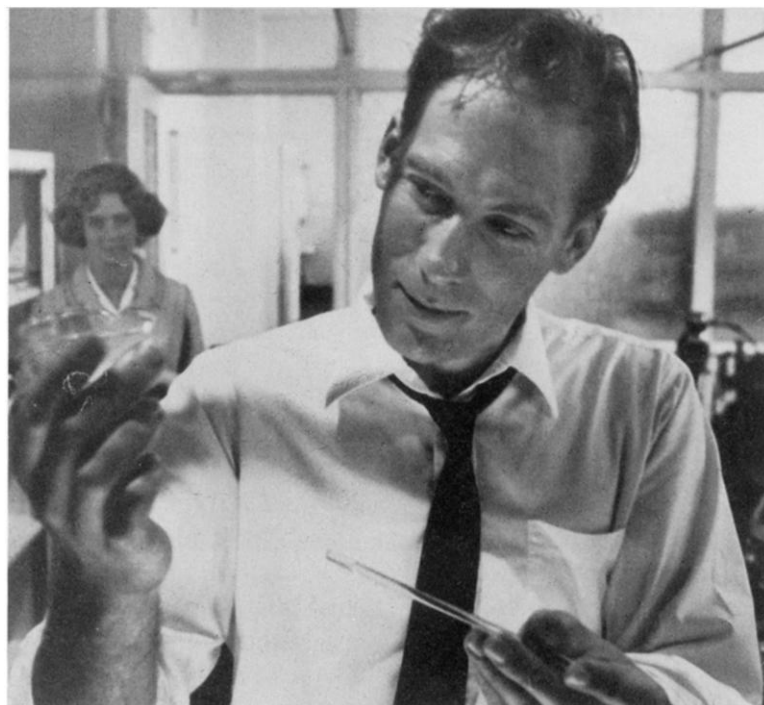


and all of a sudden that's supposed to be a complete identity when the disease is determined. In the star story, the star is the dual identity of success and fame, and then an evil element brings about the decline or fall.

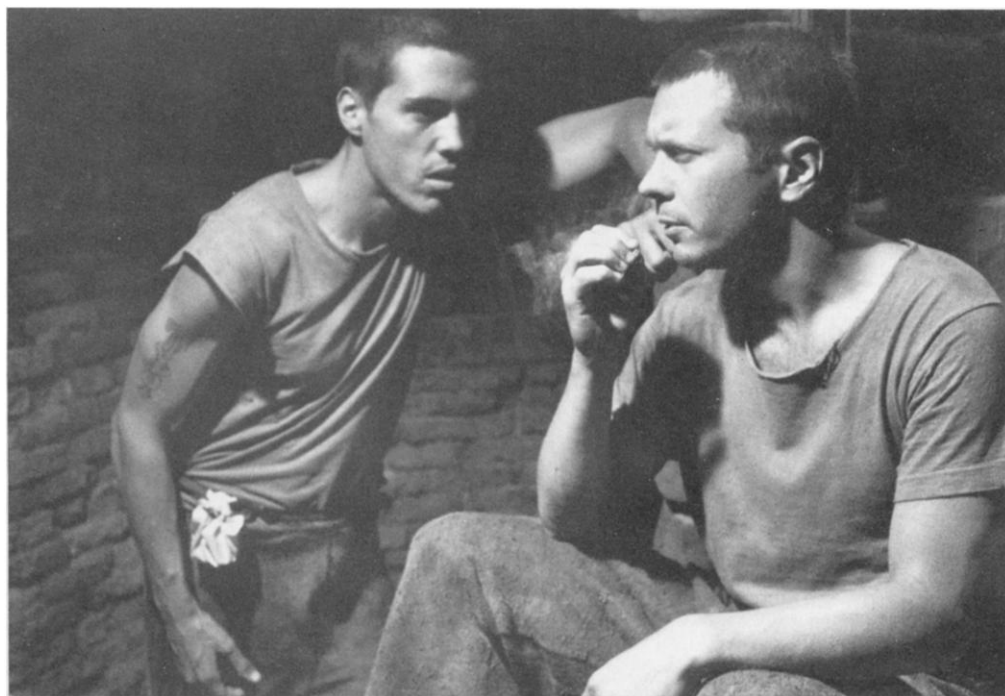
Similarly, in *Poison*, it's how all three of these genres or styles have a history of dealing with the notion of transgression and taking care of that threat in various ways. For a genre fan, maybe the film is really fun and fulfills all of those deconstructive and, at the same time, recuperative instincts.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

But are you looking for an emotional response?

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



Larry Maxwell as Dr. Graves and Susan Norman as Dr. Nancy Olsen in the "Horror" story of *Poison*



Poison: James Lyons as Jack Bolton (left) and Scott Renderer as John Broom in "Homo"

What are your views on the argument of essentialism versus social constructionism in homosexuality? How does this influence your film-making?

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

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

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

I think it's fine. The film is absolutely the result of AIDS and also a result of Genet. Obviously both

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

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

Does that relate to your personal feelings about homosexuality?

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

The concept of labeling seems really important to Poison: the first scene with Broom being admitted to prison—centering on his acceptance of the label "homosexual," the ways in which the neighbors are

bothered by Richie because they can't label him. Can you talk about how labeling structures the film?

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

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

What responsibilities, if any, do you feel you have being a film-maker who is gay?

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

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

. . . and *Lost Companion*. Is it *Lost Horizon* or *Lost Companion*? I get those fantasy things mixed up. "Let's imagine all the AIDS people returning at the end." Obviously, I have problems with the protocol of that. In fact, I have a lot of frustration with the insistence on content when people are talking about

homosexuality. People define gay cinema solely by content: if there are gay characters in it, it's a gay film. It fits into the gay sensibility, we got it, it's gay. It's such a failure of the imagination, let alone the ability to look beyond content. I think that's really simplistic. Heterosexuality to me is a structure as much as it is a content. It is an imposed structure that goes along with the patriarchal, dominant structure that constrains and defines society. If homosexuality is the opposite or the counter-sexual activity to that, then what kind of a structure would it be? I think that it has been documented in film theory that conventional narrative form adheres to and supports basic ideological positions and structures in society and enforces heterosexual closure and romance in films. For me, it's the way the narrative is structured, the way that films are machines that either reiterate and reciprocate society—or not.

What are your feelings about those mainstream films concerning homosexuality?

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

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