“Something That Is Dangerous and Arousing and Transgressive”: An Interview with Todd Haynes

- *Julia Leyda*
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Note: In the process of compiling and editing a comprehensive collection of interviews with Todd Haynes for publication in the Conversations with Filmmakers *series from University Press of Mississippi (forthcoming in 2013), I took the opportunity to meet with him myself and ask him some questions of my own. I sat down with Todd Haynes in Portland, Oregon, on March 29, 2012.* — Julia Leyda

JULIA LEYDA: You’ve done several movies that are very clearly woman’s films, but the movie that I am most fascinated with in terms of gender is Velvet Goldmine, which is not usually interpreted in that context.

TODD HAYNES: No, except it’s probably gotten the strongest female fan base of any of my films. And what’s wonderful for me is to see new generations of young women, even as we think we progress as a society and there are new options available to each new generation that seem to be catering to that market more acutely, still *Velvet Goldmine* offers that market something that they’re not getting elsewhere. I always love it when girls come up to me at festivals and that’s the one, that’s the movie that really turned them around.

I’m interested in how you use the trope of playing with dolls in Superstar and Velvet Goldmineas a way to figure gender, embodiment, desire, identification. You said in an interview that playing with dolls is what you’re doing in Velvet Goldmine, using it as a metaphor for the filmmaking process, to play with the characters of the idols more than making an actual biopic about bisexual pop stars. So what about the female characters in Velvet Goldmine? Fans, rock and roll girls like Mandy — talk a bit about them.

Interesting question. The character of Mandy was probably one of the hardest roles I’ve ever had to cast. We did a really thorough, international search for who could play Mandy. When I look back on the experience, I’m amazed at how many actresses agreed to read for the role who don’t often do so. I think what was difficult about Mandy was that she, and the Angela Bowie template for that character, harkened back to a kind of performative femininity of which there

are very few contemporary examples anymore. I see it as the Patti Smith divide in terms of rock and roll and public depictions of femininity, whose image emerged finally, after so many variations on the codified mannerisms that were available to women in midcentury American film, for instance, and popular music (although there have always been interesting deviations from this). I think over time a lot of the affectations associated with performing femininity had fallen away, to the point where you came to this iconic figure of Patti Smith, whom I see as similar in a way to the Jude figure in *I'm Not There*, a very androgynous, more masculine-identified figure. For young actresses reading the role of Mandy it became clear that recent examples of that kind of almost camp presentation of an affected, theatrical persona were very hard to locate; I think of Liza Minnelli, and maybe Parker Posey was one of the later examples, of almost a gay male idea of femininity.

One thing that was very interesting about Angela Bowie is the way she navigated the English and American influences and her accent would come and go, and that was one of the things we wanted to incorporate into the performance, but that's very tough on an actor. We wanted to make it understood that it's a mutable way of fixing into each culture with some fluidity. I mean, there's no question that Angela Bowie was a central driving engine — her autobiography is amazing, and it's supported by most of the documentation and oral histories of those years — in the transformation of David Bowie, who was experimenting with different kinds of feminine representations but ultimately fixed on this Warhol-infused figure of the Ziggy Stardust character. It was really Angela Bowie who championed these kinds of characters, part of the second-generation Warhol clan, who made their way to the UK and appeared in this play *Pork* in 1971. They just loved her and she loved them, and in a weird way Bowie was sort of a spectator, an observer of this love and energy. And I think, based on what she wrote in her book and other documentation, she was very interested in the gay liberation movement that was burgeoning at the time and she wanted to appropriate it, take it on, and become the spokesperson in a rock and roll vernacular for those ideas.

I don't know if this relates directly to doll-playing except that it really might be the last time that you see an active female figure freely utilizing artificial terms of self-expression and persona in an unembarrassed, unabashed, almost radical way. That was in a way the fascinating counterpart to the more aloof, silent, objectified figure that Bowie assumed as Ziggy Stardust. Of course, there was also that hardcore influence from the American music that he loved — the Stooges, the MC5, and the Velvet Underground and Lou Reed — as the final ingredient to give it that kind of duality, the cross between English musical traditions and this American hardcore, a direct assault. He needed both of those, but there was still a kind of passivity and object-ness of that figure that seemed more quiet, and more comfortable being an image, an idealized beautiful façade that people could project onto; whereas Angela Bowie was active, pulling the strings and moving the levers — in that way, I think, making him up so that he was the doll that she was playing with. So a lot of that energy and that fire and fearlessness I think could be attributed to her.

That makes perfect sense to me — that is how I see the character of Mandy in the film, and the way that she gets shunted aside, because he's moving on to a different persona.
Exactly. After first embracing bisexuality in the free flow and openness of that marriage and the flexible terms of their sexual dalliances, she is ultimately be excluded by this little romance, pushed to the side and becomes the spectator in the wings. I think of that one scene where they all gather in the wings watching Curt Wild perform a kind of apocalyptic ultimate expression of himself, she's this melancholy observer of what she's had a hand in fostering and then been excluded from.

In the doll-playing scene in Velvet Goldmine, the girls are like Mandy, manipulating them and fantasizing about them. So that trope of little girls playing with dolls scene really gets at the way the movie is about bisexuality and a kind of less bordered sexual identity, that is based in play, in fantasy —
— is fluid, is mutable, is conducive to all kinds of voices and all kinds of players pulling the strings. But one thing that *Velvet Goldmine* kind of misses is how strongly and passionately young women

were the driving desiring consumers of this very unique moment in popular culture history. That has continued, too: the androgynous male object is something that still attracts a really passionate, active female spectatorship. That's so fascinating to me, and you can see it played out in so many different ways: the tradition of the Japanese comics of the '70s, what's it called again?

The subgenre of manga with the boy lovers and its girl fans, yaoi.

Exactly. The boy lovers and the girl fans, really directed at girl consumers, and it's this androgynous, starry-eyed princes and pretty boys who have sparkly eyes for each other.

I wondered if you were aware of yaoi or not. When I was working on a conference paper about the girl fans in Velvet Goldmine some of my colleagues said, Hey that's just like yaoi! And I said, Wow, it really is, but I have no idea if that's part of what he was thinking or if it's just a coincidental, cross-cultural parallel.

It was a tangent that I learned about in the process of research, but I don't remember when exactly. I was certainly aware of how there was a particular Japanese following with a passionate attachment to the Bowie phenomenon, glam rock, T. Rex; Japan made up a major part of their market. But I think it's an interesting counter-argument to the classic Laura Mulvey idea of a limited female spectatorship and if anything it only further underscores — although I think this is all embedded in that, and though I haven't read those articles in some years — that marginalized subjects, such as gay subjects and women, have to find a more dexterous and nuanced way of reading culture and finding their way into all kinds of content that is not designed for them. I think there's this ability to transform and to enter into all kinds of different subject positions of which this is one amazing and fascinating example: the glam rock thing with young girls' driving interest in it.

When I was a teenager I was a huge Bowie fan, and my mother was confused because I was always trying to look like Bowie; she would say, "You're attracted to him, you have a crush on him, why do you want to look like him? When I was younger I loved Jean-Paul Belmondo, but I didn't want to look like him." But in the '70s, and in my case the '80s, and still today I think, girls of all sexual orientations experience that overlapping between desire and identification — it's there in the Arthur character, too, but I'm thinking of in the opening sequence with the glam girls rampaging.

Right, they're absolutely rampaging, terrorizing the town in utter desire. And we all know that the passion that we see displayed there, the intensely sexual display of female spectatorship probably started with Valentino, Sinatra, the Beatles, and Elvis.

It's almost hysterical.

Yes. There was in these cases an androgynous, feminine element to the actual performance; in a way, just for the star to be up on stage, just to be objectified, is to arguably be feminized. These artists in their unique and shaded ways capitalized on that, and the result among female spectators is something that society is still startled by: that radical emotional response that it engenders.

Similarly with the British band the Libertines, there was a great deal of sexual ambiguity between the two male performers, and it wasn't clear whether they were lovers or just close and demonstrative in

ways that we aren't used to seeing among men, but female fans went crazy for that. I think that plays right into this glam dynamic as well — a sort of punk, hard-edged rock and roll, but with a homoerotic side that plays to the girl fans in particular.

This *Twilight* phenomenon too — it doesn't really end. Each generation has its own variant on that. It does call into question all sorts of assumptions about opposites attracting, the whole simplistic reductive ideas of what drives desire —— *and the borders of identity.*
Yes, and the female subjects, spectators, consumers, maybe because they've had to learn how to occupy different subject positions in dominant patriarchal culture, have revealed the ways that desiring has narcissistic or self-reflexive aspects. On the other hand, maybe male spectatorship has just been so much more catered to and delineated in solid terms, and thus hasn't been able to explore the margins as thoroughly, but women and gay people and African Americans, for example, all have to find different ways of entering mainstream cultural production.

I love that the girls with the dolls in Velvet Goldmine are storytellers, they are controlling the narrative, in a sense, and that you say that that's what you were doing as a director.

I think that's how we all begin to externalize our desires: through storytelling. Dolls are a tool that lends itself to that; they are supposedly made for little girls, and I loved dolls when I was a kid. The Barbie doll became a multiply useful subject in the Karen Carpenter film, and that was the internal nod that I was making in *Velvet Goldmine*, but it was so relevant it didn't feel like a detour or a private joke — it felt like it was getting to the core of the intense effect that is felt by these kinds of characters in popular culture. That free-floating desire in the little boy-romance that the little girls are constructing is about as sweet and tender as anything in the film.

That kind of storytelling, the freedom in play, helps the characters, but also the rest of us, decide who we are and how we want to tell our own stories.

It's the story and the engine of the film. It is really the fan's point of view — the Arthur character, obviously — but it's really the theme and the whole motor of it. I always knew I wasn't really interested in getting inside the closed doors of these famous subjects and that's why a fictionalization of this unique period made sense. We all already fictionalize and fill in and fantasize. And we see it too in the whole slash fiction phenomenon, which I didn't even know about until *Velvet Goldmine*, and in which *Velvet Goldmine* has itself become a category.

That's the cool thing about Velvet Goldmine — it is itself a sort of slash fiction, and there's this ongoing spin-off slash fiction community carrying the stories forward — it's a perfect loop.

Yes. To ignite that little flame that makes people want to respond actively and creatively and participate. It reminds me of a girl… I was scared of Bowie when I was in junior high school, and I remember I was aware of him, but it was all just too freaky. There was a girl in a lip sync show in seventh grade who picked his song "Changes." She was this beautiful girl and she imitated him, as many girls did, right, because he was so pretty.

It was easy for girls to look like him because he was so pretty.

And he was mastering makeup, cosmetics, clothes, style, and posing, in every stage of himself, in his evolution: things that girls maybe do a little more in the mirror than boys? But maybe not much more.

At that age, with makeup, yes.

Exactly. And she just did the perfect lightning bolt like Aladdin Sane, and she got her hair just right — I forgot if she wore a wig. But she performed "Changes," and I remember hearing and thinking, "Oh, this isn't so scary . . ." because I expected it to be really hardcore music and I would be put off by it. But it was so pretty.

So she turned you on to Bowie.

She really helped. Jean Sagal, I think that's her name.

I wonder if she's related to Katey Sagal — [Married with Children's] Peg Bundy.

I actually think she is.

That would be cool.

That would be cool. I think she actually might have been the sister of Katey Sagal.

I'm trying not to let my brain explode with that idea! I remember that scene in Velvet Goldminewhere they're reporting on the news, saying something like, "Girls everywhere are wearing glitter makeup," and that conveyed the society's sense of fear, of what are all those girls up to? The idea that they're going to need to be controlled again somehow because they're getting a little too weird or too powerful.

The glitter girls, as they were sometimes called, especially the LA version of the glitter girls, that's another thing I really remember from junior high. As I read later when I studied this period, they were a force to be reckoned with — extremely precocious, among some of the youngest, most adventurous and not violent, but persevering, fearless, active fans. They peopled the Rodney Bingenheimer English Club on Sunset Boulevard —

Like the Runaways.

Yes, they gave birth to the Runaways. I think it was one of those girls who ended up in Roman Polanski's house, who was fifteen or however old she was, but that's why it's very hard to examine that infringement outside of its cultural context and what was happening at the time in Los Angeles. Glitter girls scared the shit out of me when I was a kid — they were tough, and girls were already ahead of boys at that age, but they were miles ahead. It was intense. I can absolutely picture those kinds of girls, and they were intense, in their platform shoes and glitter makeup.

With Arthur, I thought you did such a great job developing that character as a kind of giddy, exuberant, awkward young guy. You've said that Velvet Goldmine was your most affirmative film,

even though the '80s scenes are so dark, it provides the character of Arthur with this memory to cherish even in the middle of the awful '80s.

Totally. I don't know if there's a more joyful moment in any of my movies than that little passage that I've been showing as a clip in a couple of festivals and retrospectives of Arthur getting the record, and making his brother agree to lend him the money taking it home, opening it up, and that cherished —

Fetishized!

— fetishized record. And then he leaves the house, stashing his coat and just prancing proudly with his badges down the street with the song playing, and yet still being met with this higher echelon of socially superior kids who look down on him, and the pretty boy who scowls at him for his presumption to even be in their company. But still I think every kid has some version of that: his awkwardness, his passion, his vulnerability, and his strength, too, are all embodied in that ability to fall in love.

That beautiful sequence ends with him turning the page one more time to the page with the image of Curt and Brian kissing. And I remember feeling that, a kind of recoiling, confusion — like it's tapping something exact, absolutely precise, but just too many membranes down to be able to be freed up, able to be voiced or affirmed. But it's something you're bookmarking for the future, that feeling you're going to return to when you have a little more strength, a little more perspective. It's touching something that you know you're going to have to get back to because it's something that is dangerous and arousing and transgressive. Christian's performance is so amazing because that sequence starts with him in the classroom, where he really looks all of a sudden like he's fourteen years old, with his ruddy cheeks —

> — *and his really bad bangs. I identified with him utterly and painfully in that scene. And his flailing dancing scene. My God, that character is so beautiful.*
> —

He did such a beautiful job. He really was so committed and so profoundly inside that guy. I remember when we wrapped and he put away the Arthur clothes and he came back and said, "I just put away the Arthur clothes and cried a little bit." And I don't know if I cried but I sure felt like I could've. I think despite all the beautiful, fancy guys in that movie, I think my heart belonged to Arthur.

Of course, because Arthur's us.

He is.

When he takes that coat off and starts walking down the street it's just: yes! We were all there. I like the way that film gives a few different positions over to that kind of fandom: audience member, fan, young person who's still working things out, still trying to figure out who they are, and who they want, and who they want to be. The girls as well as Arthur.

It's also why the whole package of bisexuality, a kind of performative, made-up, dressed-up sense of identity and self, and coupled with this sense of being extraterrestrial, speaks so directly to adolescent instability and to that moment of uncertainty. It couldn't have been a more total package for the mutability of that time, touching all the nerves and also the freedoms that dressing up allows you, and imagining different kinds of love objects that aren't necessarily the ones you're supposed to have. But even that is blurry, unfixed.

Tommy Stone's star image shows the other side of that dressing-up, right? If you can change yourself that radically, you can also change yourself into a horrible, plastic thing.

Right, and a kind of converse example. The female fan who comes up to Arthur in that final scene at the bar who is so ecstatic about Tommy Stone because that's all that generation has. That's what they got — it's not their fault that the same desire, the same need for something special is expressed, but it's just not radical, or progressive, or culture-changing. But it's what they've got, and I didn't want to blame them because they are part of a culture that had to clamp down around categories once again, resume control of those categories that were seeping into each other so surprisingly for a brief time.

Exactly. That limited world that she inhabits and Arthur's wistful smile as he gives her the press pass, seeing her giddiness.

Just as the emerald pin is the ultimate token of passing on heritages and opportunities or insights or ways of radically inverting a person's destined experience. That's how that scene is framed with him passing on the press pass to her and Curt passing on the pin to Arthur. There's a nice sense of camaraderie among generations and different stations.

Today we're living in what's being called a postfeminist era, meaning that there is the sense among much of the general public that feminism is a kind of done deal, we don't need it anymore, we've achieved gender equality. So many people feel that gender is no longer a required or relevant category for analysis, or for politics. But the women in your films struggle with their embodiment, their identity, their social positions. Superstar and Far from Heavenwork within those kinds of very limited social roles, but how did you see Mildred Piercedeparting from that and/or fitting in with them? For me, Mildred is able to work and to express such eroticism, her embodiedness or physicality comes through more strongly than in your other woman's film characters.

So much of the material is full of so many fascinating contradictions. On the one hand, I was startled when I read the original novel at the complexity of this female subject, given the period and the way that we today clumsily impose a sort of pre-sixties idea of what sexual options were available to women in those days.

I mean this as a preface to answering your question — it's evident from the political discourse that's going on right now in this country on the right that we are hardly postfeminist and these are hardly settled issues. It's stunning to think of how recklessly, shockingly honest the conservative right has become. Joe Biden recently said something about how startled he was, because in all of his years in politics, the Republicans have always had to hide the ball. And all of a sudden in this new era they don't have to hide the ball anymore, and they are so unbelievably blatant and vocal about it now. It's clearly backfiring, and let's just pray that there's a price to be paid for it.

But what's so fascinating about Mildred as a character is the way she has all of this potential for incredible productive and sexual success: a willfulness and a sense that she deserves it. Of course, there are all kinds of things she has to overcome initially, the sense of pride, before she can go out and get a job and work her way up the ladder and discover her innate talents and, similarly, to venture into areas of sexual exploration that it seems evident that she had never experienced with her husband, while at the same time being so thoroughly harnessed to a whole other set of terms that have everything to do with feminine identification and subjectivity, and mothering, and class. She is just this fascinating contradiction. I found that so relevant and useful to discuss today.

So yes, unlike most domestic dramas, she occupies both the domestic space and the world of work, labor, commerce. And, in this narrative microcosm, the world of work and labor is almost solely manned by women, so to speak. It's all women, and men are casualties to the economic crisis, and to the shifting social and class definitions and aspirations of a radically challenging moment in American social and economic history.

But I don't think I would have been interested in telling that story were Mildred not imbued with all of these strengths and abilities and possibilities, countered by a serious pathology around her daughter, and based also around middle-class aspirations around mobility and excess and all the things that we're told we should be giving our kids. So it all came from an economic and social idea of what middle-class life is about, even while she's seemingly breaking those rules, or expanding or disregarding the limitations that they suggest. Then she turns around and is just completely immobilized, and all of her power and confidence and good instincts are undermined by this other issue.

On some basic level, it's about misplaced love or misplaced desire; it's the way that Mildred has invested a kind of romantic love and satisfaction in her maternal role, and how effective withholding love can be, on the part of Veda. She's learned how powerful that is.

Right. It's interesting too because Mildred has managed to kind of convert her domestic skills into a corporate success, doing all the motherly, housewifely things cooking and serving home-style meals, but doing them in the market instead of in the private home. But she's unable to make a similar kind of conversion in the other areas of her life.

Exactly. And literally converting homes into restaurants. It's all about a conversion of domestic skills and domestic knowledge into an effective business model that is successfully addressing a certain need. In the zeal to give her daughter everything, so much more than she has had, it's so intensely — in the James M. Cain novel, which we're pretty faithful to — and rigorously about class. I just find that to be such a brilliant, critical point of view that counters all of the genuine admirable qualities and successes that she displays. It's a smart, tough, unsentimental criticism of America. It's great.

It is. In the original novel there's the whole part about how she loves to drive fast, which is a powerful metaphor for her desire for excitement, power, control, and mobility. In my dissertation I used a quotation from the novel, toward the end of Chapter Four, just after she's dropped Bert off at Mrs. Biederhof's and zooms away in the car: "She gave the car the gun, excitedly watching the needle swing past 30, 40, and 50 . . . Then she eased off a little on the gas, breathed a long, tremulous sigh. The car was pumping something into her veins, something of pride, of arrogance, of regained self-respect, that no talk, no liquor, no love, could possibly give." She's so energized, independent, satisfied. So in a way this character makes me think about how much further she gets to go than Karen Carpenter or Carol White or Cathy Whittaker, and yet she's still totally frustrated in what she sees as the central relationship in her life. In a way, she seems to break out of some of the woman's film conventions of domesticity, but even though she breaks out of some of that, it's not what she needs.

No. I guess I'm just always interested in the ways in which we are not free agents, that our desires, our instincts, our anger, our determination, our survival instincts all butt against social constraints and social learning that are really deep. It's not just a matter of changing your job or your lover. So, in the Depression, the whole way we were looking at how we were going to rebuild this country and retain and preserve certain values that had been learned in a relatively short amount of time, in the 1920s, showed this ability and courage and great examples of human endeavor, but was ultimately still curtailed and limited by patterned behavior about worth and value and rooted in ideals of wealth and success.

The women in those films are dealing with so much, particularly related to embodiment: illness, pathology like eating disorders or environmental illness or hysteria, but in Mildred's case also just hard work and the drive that her character seems to physically embody. That drive is part of her physicality, her sexuality.

Yes, she's literally a worker in ways I don't think I've explored in a female-driven story. And that performance by Kate Winslet is so remarkable because I think I must have picked up on this in other roles that she's played, but I don't think I've seen it so thoroughly explored as in Mildred: how you see her working and just stomping through life. Even in her sexual life with Monty, she allows herself to go places that are also transgressive. In a weird way it's almost the only place she does seem to feel comfortable being demeaned: in a sexual context where roles are being played in the bedroom and

there's a surprising pleasure in enacting different kinds of more denigrated positions, which I think her character and her pride would protect her from in her life outside the bedroom.

Another sense of that appears in the play-acting of class, the performing of class, which it always is at some level and which we learn when we see that Monty has actually lost his money and she's propping it up and underwriting it. This whole idea of a privileged blue-blood, the closest we come to an aristocratic tradition, who is being constructed and supported by middle-class labor.

Chicken shacks.

Exactly. Because we need the image of it. We see it performed in a questionable way in the world and then performed in a way that can provide surprising and unexpected pleasure in a sexual context in the bedroom. But in both cases it's performative. There's something so funny about how, when Americans are asked what their class affiliation is, it's always wrong. It's always a put-on.

That self-misrecognition.

Exactly. Rich people always claim they're middle class, and poor people always claim they're middle class, and so everybody's middle class. Such a fascinating way of not knowing ourselves and projecting our wishes, and denying our differences.

That fits today obviously, as you said, and with the '30s context with the way that the characters who are most invested in upper-class identity like Veda and Monty are both such horrible, wretched human beings. Also Mrs. Forrester, who tries to hire Mildred as a maid and tells her she has to come in the back entrance. What Cain was going for and you were able to convey there was the unflinchingly anti-rich sentiment of the time.

Right. It's that post-Crash, Depression-era America, quite unlike our recent economic meltdown in which somehow the rich have not been as fully indicted as one would expect. And yet, what is so brilliant is that we see so many people we are supposed to respect and admire, like Mildred, who are so enamored of wealth and those values associated with it. Even just classical music is a marker of ascent, of high-brow culture and of upward mobility; it's something that you proudly allow your children to explore while you can't quite pronounce the words yourself. In a weird way you are guaranteeing your loss of, or disconnection from, your own offspring and that relationship, by propelling them upward.

Stella Dallas! Exactly the same thing. The working-class mother pushing her daughter to achieve upward class mobility beyond where she herself was able to go, so that they leave their mothers behind.

Exactly. The maternal sacrifice.

I think that fits in the '30s, but I also wonder if that image of the wealthy from the '20s can speak to us today. I'm thinking of Fitzgerald's early work, The Beautiful and Damned, which is a slightly sympathetic satire of a young upper-class couple who are waiting for him to come into his inheritance, but there are little moments of pathos amid the drunkenness and decadence, because the novel shows how they've been conditioned into their class identity so thoroughly — and it destroys them. It's a drama and a critique all mixed together, which in a way reminds me of Mildred Pierce but the other side of it, maybe, and pre-Crash.

I haven't read that novel, actually. But I find it very interesting how much *Downton Abbey* has become such a fascination for Americans right now, definitely took some of the wind out of the attention for *Mildred Pierce*, when we were literally competing for prizes. I just said, "Yep, that's who we Americans are. That says it all." Intense worship of wealth, privilege, and the moneyed classes — that persistent and irksome insistence that it's available ultimately to any of us, that you don't want to end the Bush tax cuts because maybe someday that might be me! That little nagging Lotto desire — you have to admire that sort of optimism. All the things we believe about social mobility unfortunately are not supported by statistics anymore, but are still stubbornly rooted in our sense of who we are and who we could be.

That was an ironic moment for the awards, sadly perfect. It really does show where the American people are right now.

And we know even in the '30s the movies provided escapism, although most of those Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movies were about some level of counterfeit assumption of wealth, where he was usually a regular guy who found his way into the top hat, as in the song. A kind of appropriation of those styles, a regular guy could enter into the shoes of the wealthy and be as dashing and graceful as any of them. But those images were profound and provided an imaginary escape from what was happening. It shouldn't totally surprise us, I guess.

No. The Beautiful and Damned. I want you to make that movie.

All right. I will. Good, I'll read it.

Here's a Fassbinder quotation about Sirk's Imitation of Life: "The cruelty is that we can understand both of them [Sarah Jane and Annie]. Both are right and no one will be able to help them, unless we change the world. At this point, all of us in the cinema cried, because changing the world is so difficult." Every time I read that quote I cry — it gets at the power of melodrama to make people political, not through intellect but through affect. It seems to me that that's something that runs through Sirk and Fassbinder and also a lot of your films. What do you think?

That's one of my very favorite passages. With *Far from Heaven* I was trying to devise a sort of diagrammatic narrative without a villain — many melodramas originally featured a dastardly villain tying the heroine to the railroad tracks — but the sophisticated midcentury period of melodrama, which has its roots in the '30s with John Stahl's films that were often directly adapted by Sirk —

And Stella Dallas.

Oh, exactly. In those movies, the rigid social environment is described and basic, relatable human desire emerges, and that's all it takes for certain decisions to be made that put inordinate pressure on the subjects. What's really touching about melodrama, as Thomas Elsaesser has written, is that these films are about people who are not up to the challenges that they face, they are not heroes. And while they seem to be about as glossy and gorgeous and perfect as any hero in any other kind of movie, they really are like us that way. So they cave in.

I love that moment in *All That Heaven Allows* after she's broken up with the Rock Hudson character due to the pressure of her kids, and then she calls them up and they're like, oh, mom, I'm going to sell the house, and I'm going to marry this guy, and all of a sudden, everything she just sacrificed to satisfy them, and to stop the tears from the daughter in that insane scene in the daughter's bedroom with the stained glass window, all of that comes to nothing. Life has these sudden absurd turns where we're left behind and no one even knows it, it's not intentional; it's just life. It moves forward and leaves you and your sacrifices behind. So melodrama shows the ways that we give in to the social pressures that we see as futile and meaningless, and we wish that that person could have stood up and said no, and when they do it's just too late for other reasons, and there's a twist of fate or timing that makes it all feel so fragile, so fickle, and so out of their determination. *Imitation of Life* is the one that makes us all cry in ways few other Sirk films do — they are all Brechtian in so many fascinating ways, they do bring you in and push you out at the same time, and push you to consider these subjects against the social forces. But in that one there's something so innately bare and exposed about Annie's pain and the daughter who just wants to have a life, and more options and choices. She didn't plan to be light-skinned; it's just what she is, and so she's afforded certain movement in society that her mother wasn't. You do understand all the sides, and it kills you.

In *Far from Heaven*, I tried to put everybody in a kind of tangle so that when one person makes a step toward their desire, it ricochets around everybody and everybody suffers accordingly. But you can't really blame or isolate any individual for that. In*Safe* it was a bit more tricky, in that I was following the logic and the narrative expectations that we come to have in the tradition of disease movies, and the way a kind of self-realization is afforded these subjects in these kinds of movies by the end of the film. We followed those narrative steps while laying evidence of the values attributed to that self-knowledge, that growth, that realization, against the viewer. So you have to weigh the evidence, and feel the narrative closure that usually makes you feel relief, but in this case you had collected too many cues to question whether these values are really beneficial to this character. I had that young person's slight nastiness in misleading you, like making Peter Dunning a sufferer of AIDS, which we knew was a kind of plus — you have to trust him because he has AIDS, so what he says to his gathering of followers has got to be reliable. It's a little trick to hook you into thinking.

So at the end of Safe, when she says, "I love you" to the mirror: I always saw that as a dark moment where she's mouthing the words of the other character from earlier in the film, in her desperation. But I just watched it again last week, with a friend who argued that Carol is getting better, because in the last part of the movie she actually laughs more, she's finding something new in her life. I thought, wow, you are so much more of an optimistic person than I am.

Right. It's complicated. It plays into what we are all told, these universalized ideas about self-reliance and about feeling empowered by assuming responsibility for what happens to us in the world. That's very much what the conservative model is when it's played out in political terms. A notion of liberty gets construed with that, and when a government tries to create safety measures and ways of

intervening imbalances and fates that seem to be beyond the individual's control, you're depriving them of their own liberty, mobility, freedom, and responsibility.

Yet I saw that same idea being played out in more leftist recovery theories. And we all are subject to them; we all play that game when we get sick, saying "What did I do to make myself get sick?" Even in the smallest ways, and in the biggest ways. Culpability makes us feel like we can control things that are bigger than us; it's a profound and fascinating part of human nature. I think in that way it's not an absolute; you see somebody following the rules and being told that they're in control, and it feels good to be told you're in control even when you may not win in the end. I think that's why people can have both points of view about it. But I always find that middle section of*Safe* to be the most optimistic or hopeful, where everything is falling apart and she doesn't even know who she is anymore, and she starts to go to the discussion group and she's taking an active role in questioning the terms of her life and illness in ways that she never had before. Maybe she's not laughing, but there's some potential there; she's not being told what to think. There's a sense of the unknown and the indeterminate, that each subject has to figure it out for themselves.

I see that, the way she's trying to investigate her illness and contradicts her doctor.

Right, and standing up to her husband.

That is a particularly American desire for control. That's the way you have talked in earlier interviews about the Louise Hay books — and there is a similar rhetoric in cancer self-help literature; even as we know that the immune system is influenced by things like stress, that doesn't give you cancer. There is that imposed causality and self-blame that the sick person ends up with. That movie perfectly illustrates that dynamic.

I just wonder when people say, everything happens for a reason, that idea — does that translate to European cultures in the same way? Cultures that have social safety nets in place and where the individual is liberated a bit from their own part in everything that happens to them. Is there at least an acknowledgment by governments that things happen that we don't necessarily control, determine, and should be held responsible for? There was a fascinating article recently in the *New York Times* about how certain districts in the United States that receive the most support from Medicare and Medicaid are often also the most Republican. They have a contradictory way, at best, of understanding their dependency and their entitlement to those programs. They speak sometimes within the same sentence on both sides of the discussion, but ultimately, in their gut, they resent the government social welfare programs even when they are recipients. They don't realize how much a fading middle class has forced Medicare to be something that pays out so much more than we paid into it, it's had to grow and prop up a waning middle class when it's never had that burden before. It's so interesting and complicated and stubborn.

I was talking to a German insurance agent about health insurance there, and I asked about pre-existing conditions. He said, that's so ridiculous. If you're sick, you definitely need insurance — why

wouldn't we give it to you? I wonder if it's related to the cliché that European thinking is more fatalistic, so that they accept that you're going to get sick — it's not a question of personal responsibility or blame. You can't bootstraps yourself out of a serious illness.

Bad things are going to happen, we're all going to get sick, we're all going to die.

Right — death is definitely something Americans don't want to think about. So you're working on something about conservative American politics now.

Yes. It's still early on, but it definitely engages all of these economic ideas and in my own way, similar to my process of making *Safe*, I'm trying to understand things that I might initially have resistance to or prejudice against or even dismissal toward. In this case, it's about a populist, conservative way of thinking, and a contempt for government that has been so effective for the right. How that relates to working and rural Americans and some less educated populations, and how it has been so effective and enduring. The far right's policies don't really seem to be interested in the specific needs of those constituencies, and yet they've had a way of speaking to them. It clues into these exact ideas and instigating positions that we're talking about.

The narratives of personal responsibility, the bootstraps rhetoric.

Exactly. And the feeling that other people are getting benefits, gaming the system — the old "welfare queen" idea that really hasn't died. Sadly, it's just so disheartening to see, after an economic crisis that was so much the result of an unfettered, unregulated financial culture run wild, wreaking such havoc on these exact communities and lives, that it hasn't engendered a fellow feeling for other people. That seemed to be the case in the 1930s, where you just see more of a politics of resentment, and hate at its worst, far too many examples of it. And it's coincidental with a shifting majority in this country, with, obviously, the first black president — a kind of panic over what it means to be a white American looking forward in time, and asking who's looking out for the white American man today. That's unfortunate because it just feeds into similar kinds of resentments toward otherness of all kinds, that there are too many ways of expressing.

That reminds me of Huey Long. I'm from Louisiana, just a disclaimer, but he branded a form of populism in the '30s that scared the hell out of the rich. He could have been president if he wasn't —

— a maniac!

Right, a maniac, and from Louisiana, and deeply corrupt. But his rhetoric tapped into something and caught on fire and scared a lot of people in power.

Oh, definitely.

So when I saw Mildred Pierce and started thinking about the things that the '30s and today share and don't share, that's one of the big ones. A real respect for working people, and some kind of left populist political movement. Melissa Harris-Perry just said something like that about Long on her show, and I thought, bingo.

Yes, what's so funny is so many people now who consider themselves conservatives were part of the counterculture of the '60s and the Baby Boomers: a lot of people who voted for McGovern in '72 and identified with the antiwar movement, which was also an antigovernment movement.

And antiauthoritarian, which today's antigovernment movements don't share.

Exactly. The same antigovernment instincts, resentments, suspicions of so many things: the draft, Watergate.

So that slots into the '70s.

Right. The '70s economic challenges created a kind of hocus-pocus where the very same people who hated the LBJ government because of Vietnam in the early '70s and carried those resentments and applied them to the Nixonian corruption of the mid-'70s, ended up voting for Reagan in 1980. It's the same people. The only through-line is a sense of "get off my back," whether it was the left or the right, and the party affiliation becomes a more mobile, flexible afterthought almost. It was the brilliance of the Reagan culture to tap right into that, and also what we don't see today, to filigree it with optimism and a benign future, and that American exceptionalism, again, the idea that we can overcome our problems and rise up the economic ladder. The same promises to working people that they have the ability to ascend. It was a newly glamorous era as well, which when you lived through it was disturbing, but it worked.

I just taught a US film in the '70s course and my students were amazed by that '70s-era, across-the-board rejection of authority: that suspicion of government, of parents, of traditional middle-class sexuality. Antiauthoritarianism was such a given at that time, and then there's just a wall that comes up in the '80s with Reagan and Thatcher. Velvet Goldmine positions that really well too.

Yes, it was a radical shift. When you look at the policy positions of Republicans in the '70s, like Nixon, it's stunning to see how far out of the mainstream they would be today. How far we have diverted to the right, while at the same time, certain social values have progressed in positive ways: views about gays in this country, for example. You can see a society literally learning, the way you did in the civil rights era, and actually exceeding the positions of politicians, moving faster than them. That's an amazing thing to see amid so many other kinds of resentments.

In the '90s, in the context of multiculturalism, different liberation movements were concerned about the politics of representation: is visibility the ticket to equality? Or is it just another kind of tokenism, where people can say, "Well, there's a black character on this sitcom, so we're not racist anymore." Especially with a growing number of queer characters — mainly white, male, middle class — more and more visible on television, and the "It Gets Better" movement. I saw a really interesting YouTube comeback to that by a working-class lesbian of color, who said, basically, "It doesn't actually get better if you live in my neighborhood, but you get stronger. Don't give up, and live strong."

That's cool — that's interesting.

She was putting a powerful class spin on what I previously had seen as a great grassroots movement, but suddenly she reminded everybody —

— where that might be coming from. Right. I read something recently about Southern gay marriages and couples in the South, how there's a growing number of women getting together with other women in the South, often in interracial relationships, where in terms of regional social and economic factors you would least expect it. It also seemed to make a lot of sense. I think the changes in attitudes about gay issues is just a result of the fact that it does happen everywhere — it's not determined by socioeconomic or racial or regional factors. Because people have more opportunity to speak about it, they're recognizing that they know gay people in their lives all over the place. What determined Jesse Helms, in the very last years of his life, all of a sudden reversing his positions about gay issues? My only explanation is that there was a kid, a nephew or somebody in the family who emerged, like in the Cheney family. It's unavoidable now.

But I do think there's been a retreat from complex issues of representation around gay subjects, and minority subjects. New Queer Cinema in the 1990s was really a pivotal moment not just because it was fueled by a socioeconomic crisis and imperative to speak about gay themes, but it produced complex work that didn't simply create new gay heroes as subjects. It dealt with the politics of representation, it ventured into transgressive themes, whether it was a film like *Poison* or *Swoon*, challenged simple ideas about victimhood and subjugation. It's really hard to find examples of that surviving today. Although clearly the increasing number of gay characters inhabiting television shows, like *Will and Grace* and *Glee*, is positive. One hopes that that makes the experience of gay teens coming out a slightly less lonesome, fearful experience, although I've heard so many stories over the years: it's always hard. It's hard to be a teenager, period. It's hard to confront your difference from others, period. And we all have them no matter who we are and what we are. And it's just hard times and you feel alone. We see the examples of that to this day, even when we think that we have a much more benign and accepting culture, surrounding us. But it's still tough — it's tough just at an individual level.

And that's why melodrama is so powerful still — I was so surprised to see how effective it was, sticking so rigorously to the artificial language of '50s American melodramatic tropes a la Sirk, almost as a kind of academic exercise or an experiment in how that would communicate with a contemporary audience. And because we were so rigorous about that, I felt like I was making as experimental a film as I made in any of my other works. To see that film get a larger reception was rewarding, and it really worked for people, those forms really work. That was reassuring in so many ways. It took a careful appropriation of them with the very best actors possible obviously, but it was not something I would have expected; other genres, I can see how they endure and keep finding relevant and new audiences that speak more directly to their allure. But melodrama is kind of a closed system, as movies they're not as pleasurable — even the very best ones leave you feeling kind of frustrated and uncertain at the end.

Yes, exactly. The exquisite pain of melodrama where you're feeling so emotionally devastated by what's happening on the screen at the same time that you know it's a story, it's not real. True, Sirkian melodrama is systematic, but I'm thinking of maybe a bigger category such as the woman's film. Recently, not only Far from Heaven but Black Swan — as a hybrid of body horror and woman's film — and some interesting foreign films like Almodovar's The Skin I Live In, where he's playing with the mad scientist horror genre (a nod to Poison?), but it's a woman's film although it turns out the character was originally not a woman. And more conventional woman's films are still being made abroad as well: in When We Leave, a young Turkish woman in Berlin struggles with her family's conservatism and her own bicultural subject position. So I think you're right that Far from Heaven, even working within the very '50s-based signification system, touched something in American

audiences that maybe they didn't know still worked; and of course some of these other woman's films can still do that in a more modern style.

Oh, definitely. I think there's a message about difference in a lot of them, too. I mean *The Help*is another example of a recent crossover story — but they're supported by these excesses of self-awareness or self-knowledge: that way that we expect characters to come to an understanding of their circumstances and that we learn as they're learning. And yes, Almodovar, who constitutes his own brilliant tradition of playing with humor and camp excess coupled with incredibly poignant depictions of women across his films. But with room for a pleasurable interaction where you can enter and exit the confines of the story with a little bit more self-awareness.

I think the tricky thing about melodrama is that the characters don't really come to profound knowledge — they don't have that element of tragedy that has a cathartic payoff, where your suffering is made overt, externalized, and then they come to see the truth. And that's tough, because then you're only left with a sadness. In many ways, *Far from Heaven* had a bit of a tragic ending, an ending of mourning and loss, that the more traditional Sirk films don't provide you — they more often provide false happy endings or little trick catastrophes at the end that are somehow sustained in an irrational way. They leave you feeling uncertain about how things can change — I think they don't make you feel that things can change. They reify the social constraints that the characters struggle through all along, and you're watching them move into a dire circumstance and you want to help them, but you can't and they can't really help themselves. So there's no real fun in it.

No, no. But it's a weird masochistic pleasure.

It is. And that they're ultimately socially indicting — that's for many of us the ultimate pleasure, and a rarity. That in the most popular, gorgeous, art-directed melodramas, which are seemingly full of really prescriptive examples of the way we are supposed to live and supposed to look, society is not let off the hook, that it is finally the intractable villain.

Yes, right. That's almost the opposite of some of the criticism you hear about Mad Men, that we see how sexist and racist people used to be and how great everything is now. I think that's a huge oversimplification of what that show's doing —

Yes, I agree.

— but with the Banana Republic tie-ins and the smart phone apps and that PR side of it, there is a whole corporate, entertainment industry project that has to be mobilized to create what Mad Men is — it's not just what we watch on the screen. Whereas in something like Far from Heavenyou absolutely shut down the possibility of that kind of condescending attitude. We can clearly see that her world is much worse than ours, but it doesn't make us happy about our world necessarily or cause that self-congratulatory sense that at least some audiences of Mad Men experience it.

I think also the complexity of so many of the characters of *Mad Men,* who we live with now, they are kind of our companions — I think that immediate sense of superiority that it first espoused, snickering about smoking in front of your baby or putting cellophane over your kid's face, doesn't keep working when you live with these people over time. I just watched the first episode [of season five] and I don't know what to make of it, I'm still adjusting to it again — it's been a while since I've seen it. Don is so erotically and seemingly romantically directed toward the new wife, Megan: I'm confused by it. I mean, he still seems like a complicated character who's hard to totally condone, but I find this troubling — he's troublingly healthy!

Right — we want him to get better, but we don't. We love his pathology!

We don't! That's right.

I haven't watched it yet. But I didn't want to stop you because I wanted to hear your take on him.

Oh, sorry! I don't think I gave anything away. He's still with her.

I think all of your work has balanced on that knife edge of nostalgia — Velvet Goldmine clearly, even Superstar, in which you shut down the potential for smug irony almost immediately, because it is so surprisingly but instantly compelling and so easy to sympathize with the dolls. In Far from Heaven, too, it's impossible to feel a distance from those characters. That gets back to the Fassbinder quote, the idea that the social or political critiques that we get from those films are only effective because they're inside us, they've moved us emotionally, not only convinced us of an intellectual argument.

Yes, I think that's true. But I do think there's a dance around being outside and inside, with that film and wondering what the filmmaker is really doing with these conventions.

Superstar, you mean?

Both. I guess I was thinking of *Far from Heaven* but it's definitely true for *Superstar*. It has a more seemingly gleeful or initially pernicious, campy play, that in a weird way disarms you so that I think you become exposed to the emotional impact of it precisely because it seems to be devoid of that. I think with *Far from Heaven* there's probably something comparable going on, but we're more thinking, ah, okay he's doing these things with these conventions; where is it going? As opposed to the relief of those conventions as in a movie like *Pleasantville*, where the black and white becomes color and the past becomes sophisticated, and it's very much a kind of *Mad Men*, retro, superior take, updating and painting in the past to give it the sophistication of the present. You're not afforded that privilege or superiority in *Far from Heaven*, and I think at a certain point the content really sneaks up on you, and the performances and the music and the language of the medium actually work. But I suspect that some of that is because of the "I'm not expecting it to do so" equation —
Because some people will see it and think it's going to be really fake —

Yes, and it's a play on the past styles and storytelling of the past, using those kinds of retro midcentury American clichés against our allegedly more sophisticated perspective of today. I think that might disarm you from resistance to its emotional impact, in a weird way. This wasn't necessarily strategic on my part — I just wanted it to be beautiful, and beautifully artificial, and make a visual impact with that magnificence of cinematic artifice, all the elements including the music, the color, the clothes, that are kind of a pure, noncognitive perception.

There was a little three-year-old child who watched *Far from Heaven* with her mom on her lap. She just figured the kid would go to sleep while she watched the DVD, and watched the whole movie and at the end of the movie the little kid started to cry. She looked down at the kid and she said, honey, what's the matter? And the kid said, Mommy, how come that nice lady can't be with that nice man? And that's where I felt that there's something about that classical language that we had so humbled ourselves toward, reappointing and resummoning and learning from and trying to bring to a contemporary film. I felt it works, and that's the kind of movie that I've always loved. I was kind of shocked because I never really thought that I could ever do that, because I have too many ideas and authorial interference, but, at that level, I thought that was cool. That speaks to the form and to these traditions that go beyond critical apparatus and really communicate at the most basic level of what cinema can convey.

I would love to experience that movie as an innocent — it's impossible. I already know Sirk, so when I watched it I was just cheering it along.

Do you know the movie *The Reckless Moment*? Because it's hard to find.

Yes! The scene on the bed, and in the car when they're talking, oh yes!

It's fantastic. I love that movie so much. It's another one I group with the Sirk films that inspired *Far from Heaven*.

Which is such a guilty pleasure for people who know, but I love that it obviously appealed to people who didn't.

Yes, probably more so than any other film I've made. *Mildred*'s the hard one to gauge, because I know that more people saw it than anything I've made, but it's TV. The process is different, so it's like this crazy void that you throw your work out into. Of course, you never really know what people's experiences are, but you use those few examples of being in screenings of your films as little indicators of the experience, so there was a lot less of that with *Mildred*.

I guess so. So you didn't get to watch people watch it — that's too bad. So are you doing other things for television?

I'd like to — there are some things I think would be appropriate for a multi-episode scale.

Are you doing something with the novel Dope by Sarah Gran?

That's a project that Julianne Moore brought to HBO and wanted to turn into a series, I believe. Do you know the book?

Yes, I liked it a lot and could envision it as movie or miniseries immediately.

Yes, it's really interesting. But it didn't come from me; she asked if I would do the pilot of it for HBO. I think they're still figuring out if they want to do it, and she's still figuring out about the timing of doing a regular series, whether it would be a good idea. But I love the time and place of it, it's so unusual. And the central character.

Yes, and what it's doing with that hard-boiled genre is so freaky and great.

I know! I could picture it when I read it.

I could see you doing that. That would be another adaptation — you've previously written all your own movies up until Mildred.

And this isn't something I originated; she just asked me if I would do the pilot. I don't even know what that entails — I think to some degree you set up the style for the ongoing series, but I don't think I would be the showrunner or the regular person on it. All this is sort of new to me, this whole TV thing.

Well, the paradigm of quality television is still being created, right? Filmmakers like Scorsese working on Boardwalk Empire. Shows with well-known directors to initially —

— launch them, right. And then move on. It was a great experience working with HBO in the end. I really admired their intelligence, expertise, and conscientiousness about it, and it felt finally for the first time maybe ever that we were — well, we were working with a studio! On intensely solid ground, and I don't think I've ever felt that before — I don't think Christine [Vachon] has ever felt that before. Even just for her, I was thinking, you have so earned this, man! You have just earned this in spades, to feel supported where there are other people worrying about every cent and you can be there for the creative experience, like she was on *Poison* and other stuff at the very beginning. But she was often dueling with the dragons and slaying the beasts on most of the films we've made together since.

— *Julia Leyda*

Julia Leyda teaches North American literature (20th and 21st-century) and cinema to British and American literature majors at Sophia University in Tokyo. Her current projects include a collaboration with Diane Negra on disaster television, a co-edited collection with Theresa Geller tentatively entitled *Playing with Dolls: Women in the Work of Todd Haynes,* and a monograph on representations of debt and the home during the housing crisis in television and cinema.