

LESSONS IN GOVERNMENTALITY FROM TODD HAYNE'S *SAFE*

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Abstract—The principal aim of this article is to demonstrate how Todd Hayne's film *Safe* (1995) is useful in advancing understandings of governmentality. Part I outlines some key features of governmentality as articulated by Foucault and rearticulated and interpreted by others. Part II demonstrates how *Safe* explores some of the ways in which governmentality plays out and asks viewers to consider how we govern and are governed through discourses and practices related to the fear of crime and the fear of disease.

Keywords— Foucault, Governmentality, Law and Film, Safe

I. INTRODUCTION

Todd Hayne's *Safe* (1995) is a critical text for reading Foucault's notion of governmentality. *Safe* follows Carol White (Julianne Moore) who develops severe allergic symptoms - bleeding noses, rashes, nausea and headaches - for no apparent reason. It asks how fear of crime and illness are invoked in ways that generate, disperse, and reinforce strategies of regulation. The principal aim of this article is to deploy *Safe* in advancing understandings of governmentality. Part I summarizes the key features of the concept as articulated by Foucault and rearticulated and interpreted by others. Part II demonstrates how *Safe* articulates several ways in which governmentality plays out and asks viewers to consider how we govern and are governed through discourses and practices related to the fear of crime and the fear of disease.

II. ON GOVERNMENTALITY

Foucault's earlier work on power situates law or juridical power, which is prohibitive and negative, in opposition to disciplinary power, which is prescriptive and positive [1]-[2]. His later articulations posit law as intertwined with these other sources and forms of governance [3],[4]. Government then "is not a matter of imposing laws" on individuals but rather using tactics, including laws, to arrange and manage populations [4]. Consequently, governmentality is the study of power that - instead of "center[ing] either on consensus or on violence" - "link[] technologies of the self with technologies of domination, the constitution of subject to the formation of

the state" and "helps to differentiate between power and domination" [5]. Governmentality represents the range of processes, discourses, institutions, and tactics deployed to exercise power, with "the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument." [6] Apparatuses of security are "those institutions and practices concerned to defend, maintain and secure" a population [7]. Consequently, security while distinct from law, discipline and sovereignty, nonetheless commingles with the other practices of governance. With Foucault's new iteration of power, however, also came new modes of resistance, namely: "counter-politics" [8]. One expression of counter-politics is the development of "technologies of self" through which individuals "effect by their own means" or, with assistance from others, a "number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" to change and attain a measure of happiness [3],[4].

Through a governmentality lens, questions of power are actually questions around the "conduct of conduct," that is, how we govern ourselves and others [4]. The concept of governmentality is notoriously difficult to apprehend and to explain [9]. This article highlights how the film *Safe* is a complex exploration of modes of governance around fear of crime and environmental illness. While the film rarely directly engages with law, it does explore how law and norms are always interrelated in the government of populations.

III. TODD HAYNE'S *SAFE*

Safe follows Carol White, a white, economically privileged suburbanite who develops severe allergic symptoms and chemical sensitivities for no apparent reason. Through her interactions with space, objects and people, the film explores modes of governance around fear of crime and environmental illness. While it rarely directly engages with law, *Safe* is an articulation of Foucault's concept of governmentality because it illustrates how law and norms commingle with and are constituted through the government of populations.

The film opens with a long single take from the passenger's point of view in a Mercedes-Benz as it drives in a suburban neighborhood, through a stately electronic gate and into the garage of a large home. The driver, a white man exists; Carol, his passenger and wife, follows him out of the car. There is a cut to a bedroom scene where shot from above,

Carol seems apathetic to her husband's large heaving body as they make love. In later scenes, Carol embodies the mundane materialism and bourgeoisie of the San Fernando Valley in the late 1980s. Her days involve aerobics classes, collecting her husband's dry-cleaning, chastising the hired help, attending luncheons with other wives and having her hair styled professionally. The suburb is meant to symbolize safety, being from the city and its perceived threat, specifically the racialized Black or Latino other. This fear is demonstrated by Claire's high-school aged stepson who claims that "rapes, riots [and] arms and legs being dissected" in the "black ghettos of L.A." and, evoking discourses of invasion and encroachment, that such deviance risks spreading as "Black and Chicano gangs are coming into the valleys and mostly white areas more and more." Yet the film does not merely reproduce these discourses; rather, it brings back to memory the historical demarcations along race and class that would be translated into safe and unsafe areas. What is now called the San Fernando Valley is the ancestral land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples who were dispossessed by European settlers; it became home to ethnically diverse railroad labourers in the late 1800s; its demographics changed again after the war as developers built suburban complexes to accommodate the emerging middle class and returning veteran populations [9],[10]. Building the freeway in the 1960s increased access to the area for some but reinforced spatial divisions between white affluent neighborhoods and poor Latin American settlements with sweat shop factory and low-income housing, where, incidentally, Carol's domestic staff lives.

Yet *Safe* blurs the distinction between those spaces and sites of civility, enjoyed by identifiable citizens who may conditionally enter [11] and those spaces of disorder and deviance. As her symptoms become more acute, Carol is rendered a "hostage" [12] of her suburban environment: through diegetic sounds and images that suggest distress: a talk show invokes fear with crime statistics, helicopters in the distance, the emotional impact of the eerie New-Age score, and the film's signature white noise present throughout. Unable to sleep, Carol leaves her bedroom to get some air in the garden; she is immediately captured by the headlights of the police patrolling the Valley. This scene that calls into question whether she still belongs in the Valley, prefigures another, in which this same world seems to close in on her. As Carol's allergic reactions escalate, unable to inhabit her spaces of consumption - the drycleaners, her favorite restaurants, the salon - she crosses the threshold from being paragon of her immaculate and aseptic home to that of the hysterical, deviant and disruptive woman without a place [13].

Safe also presents a population increasingly governed by normative injunctions and the "transactional zone of conflict and alliance between forms of expertise" around illness [14], namely: Western medicine and Naturopathy. The normative and authoritative knowledges each produces about Carol's gendered and diseased body work in consort with practices of subjectifications. It is Carol's self-surveillance that leads her

to view her body as a 'problem' requiring attention. She engages in practices - a fruit cleanse, exercise, beautification - whether they are productive technologies of the self or part of the disciplinary "regime of femininity" [15] is unclear. In any event, they fail to bring her back to health and even exacerbate her increasingly tangible, visible symptoms of a life-threatening illness. Her male doctor's orthodox scientific and technical knowledges about women's pathologies leave him incapable to ascertain a cause. Carol resists his authority, invokes an alternative understanding of self as she searches for her answers to her compromised immune system, namely the authorized knowledge of the self-help and self-diagnosis movement.

She moves to Wrenwood Center for Chemically Sensitive People. The desert retreat, a remove from both the city and the suburb, promotes an environmentalist philosophy: "physical and mental purity through pure foods," and building a life in a "toxic free environment." Indeed, it is here that Carol's illness is first acknowledged and where she finds encouragement and support in her efforts to become "clear" through "self-love." Its founder and self-appointed spiritual guide, a "chemically sensitive person with AIDS," radiates in good health. He tells his disciples of his power to ward off "negative stimulus:" "if I believe that life is destructive ... my immune system will too and I can't afford that risk." The staff works to uncover through confession the hidden individual failings that lie beneath chemical sensitivity, AIDS, and cancer: Carol's rapidly depleting health on her self-loathing, another patient's on her inability to forgive the man who raped her. By the end of the film Carol sounds very much like the other attendants ("We are Safe.") but her health continues to deteriorate. Eventually, she is moved to a single, climate-controlled, ceramic-lined unit. An oxygen tank by her side, face scabbed, body emaciated, she whispers to the mirror "I love you. I love you."

IV. CONCLUSION

Safe is a critique of power, both in the sense of the Regan government's policies in 1980s which marginalized people living with AIDS and the co-determining self-help movement that operated in ways to constitute self-regulating, self-disciplining, and often self-blaming subjects. Through allusion (Carol's unnamed immune system disorder), cinematography (long, drawn out single takes rather than close-ups that invite identification), and thematic explorations of abjection, the film helps broaden our understanding of one of Foucault's most complex and polarizing concepts: governmentality, which proposes the study of "how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best governor" [4].

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