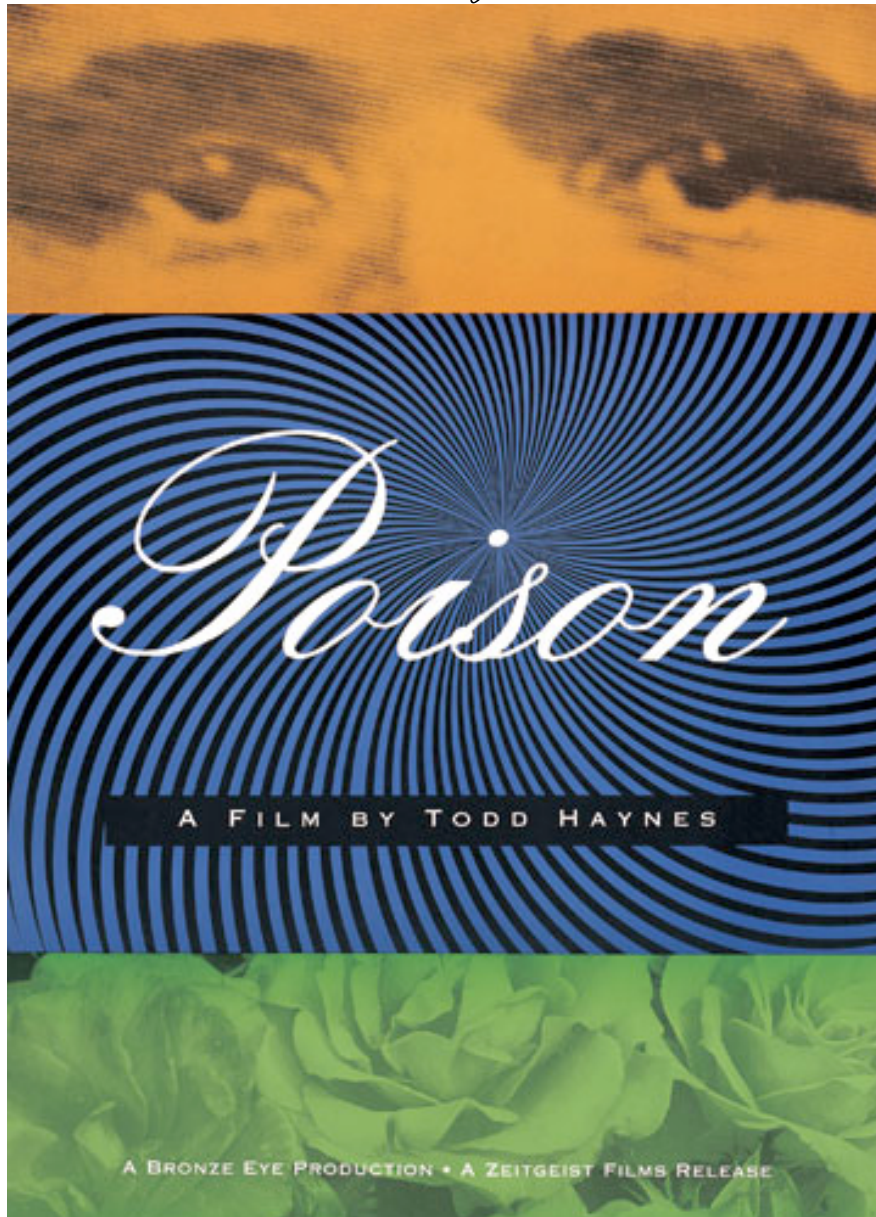


*20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Re-release*



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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

# Poison

*20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Re-release*

**Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival, Todd Haynes' controversial masterpiece *Poison* is returning to movie screens for a 20th Anniversary Re-release in a new 35mm print.**

The second feature directed by Haynes—the Oscar-nominated filmmaker of *Far from Heaven*, *I'm Not There* and the upcoming HBO mini-series *Mildred Pierce*—this groundbreaking American Indie was the most fervently debated film of the 1990s and a trailblazing landmark of queer cinema. A work of immense visual invention, Haynes' spectacular follow-up to his legendary *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* is audacious, disturbing and thrillingly cinematic.

Inspired by the writings of Jean Genet, ***Poison*** deftly interweaves a trio of transgressive tales—"Hero," "Horror" and "Homo"—that build toward a devastating climax. "Hero," shot in mock TV-documentary style, tells a bizarre story of suburban patricide and a miraculous flight from justice; "Horror," filmed like a delirious '50s B-movie melodrama, is a gothic tale of a mad sex experiment which unleashes a disfiguring plague; while "Homo" explores the obsessive sexual relationship between two prison inmates.

A runaway hit which made national headlines when it was attacked by right-wing figures including Dick Armey, Ralph Reed and minister Donald Wildmon, ***Poison*** is unsettling, unforgettable and thoroughly entertaining.

# Poison

## PRODUCTION NOTES, ORIGINAL RELEASE

Director Todd Haynes and producer Christine Vachon first began thinking about **Poison** in the winter of 1988. Haynes knew he wanted to follow his much-heralded underground film *Superstar* (which tells the story of Karen Carpenter using Barbie-sized dolls, detailed miniature sets, documentary-style footage about anorexia, Carpenters' music and newsreel material) with a film that used the work of Jean Genet to explore transgression. He also knew that he wanted to use actors—not dolls.

**Poison** was originally conceived as a fairly modest short feature with a few locations and actors and perhaps 15 shooting days. Gradually it swelled to a cast of over 100 and a six-week shooting schedule. **Poison** is divided into three separate, but interrelated, sections: “Hero,” “Horror,” and “Homo.”

“Our biggest challenge was the ‘Homo’ section,” recalls Vachon. “We knew that the money we had would not allow us to *build* the look we wanted, so we had to scour the New York area for a location that could somehow work perfectly as a 1940-ish French prison. Our most helpful resource turned out to be the U.S. military.”

The filmmakers looked at Army, Navy and Coast Guard bases in the New York area. Most of them were old stone forts (some dating back hundreds of years) that had actually been operating prisons at one time. The production ended up shooting in Castle Williams on Governor’s Island (run by the Coast Guard)—a two-minute ferry ride from lower Manhattan.

“Castle Williams is a huge circular structure filled with dank cells and dark stone staircases,” says Vachon. “The prison cells were very authentic—two crew members accidentally locked themselves up for a good half-hour before we were able to break the lock.”

In order to construct the lush studio set needed for the Batton reformatory (also featured in “Homo”), the filmmakers made a deal with the State University of New York (SUNY) at Purchase. The production was allowed to use Purchase’s sound studio, and in exchange ten film students were brought onto the set as production assistants. The hardest part about the set construction was bringing in—and bringing out—the two truckloads of earth it took to construct the floor of the set.

The main locations of the “Horror” section of **Poison** were Christine Vachon’s house, her best friend’s house, and her mother’s house. Most of the exteriors for “Horror” were shot in Brooklyn’s Vinegar Hill neighborhood, an area with the right “small” city feel the filmmakers wanted to match the mood of 1950s-era horror films. “Horror” was shot during what were perhaps the two hottest weeks of the summer of 1989—one unforeseen problem was that Dr. Graves’ complicated special effects make-up would sometimes slide off in the heat.

“We were able to make **Poison** because we were able to assemble crew members who were incredibly dedicated to the project and to Todd and myself,” Vachon says in conclusion. “This was especially important because a lot of the material was difficult and/or explicit. The atmosphere on the set was always tremendously supportive.”

# Poison

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT, ORIGINAL RELEASE

When Jean Genet died in 1986, it made me realize that all this time, somewhere in the world, he'd been kicking around. What was he thinking when he opened up the paper? What would he have said about AIDS or Reagan or Jesse Helms? It was around this time that I first started thinking about creating a film that would enable some of these issues to interact with themes from Genet's work. So I suppose it was inevitable that **Poison** would be a film about deviance.

Genet—the outlaw poet, thief, homosexual—always aligned himself with the deviant in society. Even late in his life, he seemed more at ease tagging along with the Black Panthers or the PLO than within the literary circles that had first liberated him (he was officially pardoned from a life sentence in 1947 partly due to a petition circulated by Cocteau and Sartre). In Genet's writing transgressive acts are transformed into sacred rituals, described in luxurious language. Sartre called it the art of making you eat shit, which Genet tricks his readers into eating “by presenting it, from a distance, as rose jam.”

Genet held the world permanently in contempt, vowing from an early age to reject it as it had rejected him. And his resolve is still inspiring me. Whether or not it's even entirely real, I think it encourages you to consider your own participation in systems of division and in the imposition of laws that make transgression, at times, a necessity.

In **Poison**, transgression is considered globally in the form of three interwoven stories. And although they're depicted in distinctly different styles, they are each, ostensibly, the same story. What distinguishes them is not so much in what's being said as in who's saying it: who's telling each story and why. What we learn, for instance, about the monster in a horror film, or of the suspicious subject of a tabloid documentary is very different from what we might learn from Genet, the exiled criminal of *Miracle of the Rose*. But in all three cases, we encounter a central character that has been shut out by his society as a result of his transgression of certain laws.

**Poison's** structure created many challenges, but my primary concern was that it be a source of stimulation for the viewer. Although today's video-fluent filmgoers experience something very much akin to fragmented narratives every time they flip around the channels on the TV, I still felt it was essential that beneath its braided structure, **Poison's** central themes were clearly drawn. With any luck, it's a film that plays around with the act of telling stories while at the same time asking a few serious questions about the nature of deviance, cultural conditioning and disease.

—Todd Haynes, 1991

# Poison

## Q&A WITH TODD HAYNES AND CHRISTINE VACHON

*Writer-director Todd Haynes and producer Christine Vachon spoke with noted international film journalist and Film Comment founding editor Gordon Hitchens (1925–2010) about **Poison** in the Neue Kongresshalle at the Berlin International Film Festival on February 20, 1991. The film had multiple screenings at the festival, as part of Berlin's International Forum of Young Film, directed by Ulrich Gregor.*

GORDON HITCHENS: Are you satisfied with the screenings and services provided here by your host, the Young Forum?

TODD HAYNES: Yes, emphatically. The Forum did a very good job on the film's translation, from our English to their German, plus the technical work of subtitling. They provided all of that. The Forum acquires a print at their cost, for the screening of **Poison**, but they give that print back to us. Later, if a German distributor wants to evaluate the film, we have a German subtitled print ready.

HITCHENS: Because of its cultural reputation, the Forum connects with Germany's non-theatrical network, the film clubs and other groups. The Forum's distributing arm takes on such films as **Poison** on a non-profit basis—if I'm correct, with a 50% or 70% to the producer. Are you exploring all that?

CHRISTINE VACHON: We're certainly not turning up our noses at any offers. We're wide open. We're getting lots of offers, lots of people are grabbing me by the lapels, or rather by the beads. Zeitgeist Films in New York has North American rights, but we retain all others. Zeitgeist handles Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege*, also here in Berlin at the Forum. Zeitgeist was founded by Nancy Gerstman and Emily Russo, who are perfect for **Poison** because they will give the film the time and attention necessary to get the film seen. They started three years ago and have been very successful with difficult films. Major releases include *Let's Get Lost* by Bruce Weber and two by Atom Egoyan, *Speaking Parts* and *Family Viewing*.

HITCHENS: Who or what is Bronze Eye?

VACHON: Bronze Eye is a production company that Todd Haynes and I formed to produce **Poison**. James Schamus is Executive Producer—he helps us to handle world sales, and he may join Bronze Eye. He's assisted on other films in Berlin. He gets around.

HAYNES: It's common when independent features are set up to raise money from private investors. An organization is set up, it's given a name, it serves its purpose. Often it may not last, it's not necessarily a long-term organization that will produce other films.

HITCHENS: What did you expect here at the Berlin festival?

HAYNES: I spent three months in Berlin in 1984. I had taken some time off from college to come here, studying German, and I attended the festival. It was a very exciting part of my stay here. The festival turns the whole city into a film-going event that's really great. The enthusiasm of Berliners for film is extraordinary.

Ulrich Gregor, Director of the Forum, had seen **Poison** at the IFP Market in New York last fall. He selected it, and we were barely ready in time. We were overjoyed. We felt the film was more acceptable to Berlin than to a festival like Cannes—the two are mutually exclusive.

So I'm visiting Berlin again after seven years, a very different Berlin. We all had dinner last night in the former East Berlin. What's happening here is unbelievable. As for the festival, they definitely lived up to our expectations about sophisticated audiences. Their response to a film that is challenging, that is experimental in various ways as to content, all that is gratifying. The three screenings we've had so far were jam-packed, completely sold out. That we loved. And it's an incredibly well-organized festival. In terms of the way they've treated us, it's really pleasant.

VACHON: **Poison** is in 16mm now but for wide distribution in Europe we must have a 35mm blow-up. Theatrical distribution here is just not set up for 16mm, as the U.S. is. In America, you can have a very good release in 16mm, but in Europe you cannot. We're now in the process of making a deal for our blow-up and an international M&E [Music and Effects] track, all paid for, so that we can strike prints for all territories.

HITCHENS: A 35mm negative from the blow-up would open up possibilities for a broad American distribution as well.

VACHON: That's true. But we never set out to appeal to or aim at a certain select audience. Instead, it was very much planned to be a film that Todd wanted to make. We've never been concerned with "Oh, we can't do this, we can't do that," or "They won't buy it for TV because of this or that." But if **Poison** now turns out to be a bigger film, with 35mm prints, hopefully we'll be able to accommodate those larger audiences.

HAYNES: In making **Poison**, I definitely did not censor or inhibit myself. I was determined on the one hand and lucky on the other that we were able to gather the funds to make the movie, from both grants and private investors with faith in me and in my work. It's not as if the budget was tremendous, although large for me, given my history. **Poison** cost \$250,000, which by Hollywood standards is like a sneeze, it's negligible; but for me a very big step up from my previous shot films. As a result, we felt that we wanted to make a film that really stuck to the goals and ideas that informed the script and not compromise in any way.

We were surprised at winning the Grand Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, which is fairly mainstream, an extremely visible festival. We were surprised that Sundance was even able to deal with the film, let alone reward its extremes in that way. It was incredible to us. In a sense, we were awarded for the fact that we really did stick exactly to our vision. Rarely are films given a chance to do that, and even more rarely are they rewarded for it. So we feel fortunate and happy so far.

HITCHENS: Sticking to your vision may clash with popular taste, if **Poison** distributes mainstream. You recall Aljean Harmatz's complaint about spit in her *New York Times* piece.

HAYNES: We are not so hot on Aljean Harmatz.

HITCHENS: Will you cut the spit scene—for example, if *Zeitgeist* gets a nice deal dependent on that cut?

VACHON: We'll cross that bridge later. We'll decide later. The film will always divide mainstream audiences. Surprising to us is that a lot of mainstream audiences find the film to be really engaging and exciting, they're not put off by certain difficult scenes.

HAYNES: Yes, the review in *Variety*, for instance, shows incredible insight and intelligence and complexity. *Variety* writers are smart people in the mainstream who can really deal with **Poison**.

HITCHENS: Is there a danger that you, a writer-director, will become trapped in the "gay ghetto" genre of film?

HAYNES: I think that has already happened, and Aljean has helped us along with that ghetto-ization. My next project does not connect with a gay theme. It's really important to me, as a gay filmmaker, to be outspoken and to include themes, gay or not, that are challenging. I will try to examine the mores of our society, and how hard it is to be gay or black or a woman in this culture. But I don't feel at this stage of my life that the gay perspective is the one and only perspective in the world. It's hard for a lot of people to live. And that's what my films will deal with. It's hard for a lot of people to live.

VACHON: We're hoping that **Poison** will build an audience for Todd's films and his kind of work. **Poison** has already started to do that. We're hoping that Todd's next film will again be a step up. We're not looking to make a \$10 million-dollar feature, but simply to make it with the resources we need. **Poison** is the kind of film you can make only once. You can burn yourself out, you can convince people to put in favors only one time in your life. It's been long for us, producing **Poison**, but it's really been wonderful too.

# Poison

## FILMMAKERS' BIOS

**TODD HAYNES (Writer, Director and Co-Editor):** Oscar-nominated writer-director Todd Haynes' short, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, used Barbie dolls as actors to trace the demise from anorexia of the singer, and has gone on to become an underground cult classic. His first feature, *Poison* (1991), was awarded the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 1991. Haynes' next film was *Dottie Gets Spanked*, another short that *The Village Voice* hailed as "A Pop Art vision of '50s suburbia." His second feature, *Safe* (1994), was named Best Film of the Year by leading critics at *The Boston Globe*, *Film Comment*, and *Interview Magazine*, among others. *Safe* also marked the first of Haynes' collaborations with celebrated actress Julianne Moore.

Haynes' third feature was the potent rock drama *Velvet Goldmine* (1997), starring Ewan McGregor, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Christian Bale and Toni Collette. *The New York Times* described *Goldmine* as "dazzlingly surreal," and the film was awarded with Best Artistic Contribution at Cannes. Haynes' fourth feature, *Far From Heaven* (2002), was the single best-reviewed film of 2002. Starring Julianne Moore, Dennis Quaid and Dennis Haysbert, it swept critics' awards across the country. *Far From Heaven* also garnered four Oscar nominations, including a Best Actress nod for Moore and a screenwriting nomination for Haynes. Haynes' most recent film, *I'm Not There*, debuted in 2007 with an all-star cast of Christian Bale, Cate Blanchett, Heath Ledger, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Richard Gere and Julianne Moore. The film earned Blanchett a Golden Globe, an Independent Spirit Award and an Oscar nomination, and was featured on countless critics' Top 10 lists worldwide. Haynes is currently in production on *Mildred Pierce*, a new mini-series for HBO starring Kate Winslet. It is scheduled to debut in the spring of 2011.

**CHRISTINE VACHON (Producer):** Independent Spirit and Gotham Award winner Christine Vachon is an American producer who co-founded indie powerhouse Killer Films with partner Pamela Koffler in 1995. Based out of New York, Vachon has produced more than 60 acclaimed independent films including Todd Haynes' Venice Film Festival Award-winning *I'm Not There* as well as his controversial first feature, *Poison*. Since moving into features in 1991, she has gone on to produce some of the most celebrated American Indie films of the past two decades including *Far From Heaven*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *One Hour Photo*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Happiness*, *Safe*, *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *Cairo Time*. In television, Vachon executive produced the Emmy-winning TV version of *This American Life* for Showtime and the upcoming Haynes-directed mini-series *Mildred Pierce* for HBO. She is the author of two bestselling books on independent producing, *Shooting to Kill* and *A Killer Life*.

**JAMES LYONS (Co-Editor, Actor):** James Lyons studied literature and film production at NYU, where he directed several shorts. In addition to co-editing *Poison* with Todd Haynes, Lyons also starred as the film's taunting, sexually ambiguous prison inmate Jack Bolton. Lyons continued his stellar editing career in indie film with Haynes' *Safe*, *Velvet Goldmine* (which he also co-wrote) and *Far From Heaven*, as well as Sofia Coppola's 1999 work *The Virgin Suicides*, among others. He also continued to act: memorable roles include artist David Wojnarowicz in Steve McLean's *Postcards from America* (1994) and Billy Name in Mary Harron's *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996). A longtime activist with AIDS awareness organization Act Up, Lyons sadly passed away in 2007 at the age of 46 from squamous cell cancer after more than a decade of treatment for HIV.

# *Poison* CAST

## HERO

Felicia Beacon	Edith Meeks
Millie Sklar	Millie White
Gregory Lazar	Buck Smith
Evelyn McAlpert	Anne Giotta
Sylvia Manning	Lydia Lafleur
Sean White	Ian Nemser
Jay Wete	Rob Labelle
Dr. MacArthur	Evan Dunsky
Hazel Lamprecht	Marina Lutz
Officer Rilt	Barry Cassidy
Edward Comacho	Richard Anthony
Florence Giddens	Angela M. Schreiber
Jake	Justin Silverstein
Chris	Chris Singh
Fred Beacon	Edward Allen
Jose	Carlos Jiminez

## HORROR

Dr. Graves	Larry Maxwell
Nancy Olsen	Susan Gayle Norman
Deputy Hansen	Al Quagliata
Prostitute	Michelle Sullivan
Newscaster	Parlan McGraw
Old Doctor	Frank O'Donnell
Woman in alley	Melissa Brown
Man in alley	Joe Dietl
Narrator	Richard Hansen

## HOMO

John Broom	Scott Renderer
Jack Bolton	James Lyons
Young Broom	Tony Pemberton
Young Bolton	Andrew Harpending
Rass	John R. Lombardi
Inspector	Tony Gigante
Van Roven	Douglas F. Gibson
Chanchi	Damien Garcia
Miss Tim	Les Simpson
Jamoke	Joey Grant
Canon	Gary Ray
Basco	David Danford
Doran	Jason Bauer
Preacher	Ken Schatz
Guard 1	Maurice Clapison
Guard 2	Matthew Ebert



# *Poison* CREW

Directed and Written by    Todd Haynes  
Produced by                    Christine Vachon  
Cinematography             Maryse Alberti  
B&W Camerawork          Barry Ellsworth  
Production Design         Sarah Stollman  
Costume Design             Jessica Haston  
Music                         James Bennett  
Editing                        James Lyons  
                                      Todd Haynes  
Associate Producer        Lauren Zalaznick  
Executive Producers        James Schamus  
                                      Brian Greenbaum

Inspired by the novels of Jean Genet,  
with quotations from *Miracle of the Rose*,  
*Our Lady of the Flowers* and *Thief's Journal*

1991 · USA · Color and B&W · 85 minutes • 35mm

Promotional photos are available on our website



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