

The movie *Safe* from an MCS perspective



Safe was the first film about multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) and still the only one released by a major studio. The story is still relevant and continues to be controversial within the MCS community.

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Safe was released in 1995 with Julianne Moore in the lead role as Carol White who becomes ill with environmental illness (MCS). The movie was both written and directed by Todd Haynes.

The film is set in suburban Los Angeles in 1987, when MCS was an almost completely unknown illness. Carol is an upper-middle class housewife who spends her days remodeling the large house she shares with her husband and his son of a prior marriage.

Carol has a placid personality, almost to the point where she apologizes for her own existence. She lives a quiet joyless existence in the middle of all the opulence, in what the *New York Times* called “a dead world under glass.”

Carol’s health slowly erodes as she gets exposed to the toxic fumes from paints, new furniture, hair salons, nail polish, and traffic fumes. Her sinuses give her trouble, she has trouble sleeping and can no longer keep up with her aerobics class. During a baby shower at a friends’ house she has an asthma attack. The doctor has no idea what the problem is and sends her to a psychiatrist, assuming it is hysteria.

It slowly dawns on Carol that chemical fumes are the problem. Nobody believes her and she is not used to speaking up for herself. Her husband tries to be supportive, but has a hard time understanding that his cologne is making his wife sick and uninterested in sex. Her shallow friends can’t relate either.



Carol finally has a complete collapse when visiting a store that is fumigated with pesticides. She is rushed to the hospital, but the doctors are still clueless. She sees a note on a bulletin board about an environmental illness support group that she starts attending. From there she finds an MCS-aware physician who tells her there is no cure, he can only help a little.

In desperation she travels to a New Age center in New Mexico where people live in little huts and attend uplifting sessions by a cult figure who teaches people they can heal if they just learn to love themselves. The cult figure lives in a fancy house on a hill and apparently makes a lot of money from the sick people in his camp.

While most people buy into the program, a few do not and Carol notices some people do not get better. This includes a mysterious man, clad in all white, who stays away from everybody. He is the most sensitive person in the camp, though Carol is told he is just afraid of everything. Another patient has to live in a small porcelain dome house, but he dies. The program does not seem to work so well after all.

Carol continues to get worse herself and moves into the vacant porcelain dome house. The movie ends with Carol facing dwindling hope of a recovery in quiet desperation.

MCS details in the film

Todd Haynes did his homework when he wrote the script. He met with several people from the Los Angeles MCS community and from Wimberley, Texas. The first half of the movie is an accurate description of what it can be like to get sick with MCS. There is a wealth of details taken from real-life MCS stories.

The many types of toxic exposures Carol is subjected to are classics, including the new furniture, the painters in her kitchen, her husband's copious use of grooming products, the nail polish, the hair perm and the freeway traffic.

Some people with MCS have digestive problems and become very thin so Haynes chose a thin actor and instructed her to lose even more weight during the filming.

It is probably no coincidence that Carol is childless, as that is common among people with MCS. However, Carol's personality and lifestyle is not particularly common among people with MCS, but in the 1990's it was believed that MCS only affected educated middle-class white women. This reinforced the false belief that MCS was a form of hysteria. In reality that was just the group of people who had the resources to seek out the few physicians who understood MCS, just as Carol did. Multiple studies have later documented that MCS can strike people of any type, race, education, and level of wealth.

The faddish all-fruit diet Carol follows early on in the movie was really tried by some of the people in the Los Angeles MCS community in the 1980s. When the doctors have little to offer, people try all sorts of ideas on their own, which also happened during the AIDS epidemic and with other incurable illnesses.

Carol is unable to sweat during her aerobic workout, which does happen to some people with MCS. Sweating is a major way to eliminate toxic chemicals from the body, without it the chance of an overload increases.

Carol's insomnia is typical for people with MCS when they live in an unhealthy home. It often goes away when people move to a healthy house, just as it did for Carol. Carol's lack of interest in sex is another effect of her feeling unwell.

Some people with MCS have to wear a face mask or respirator when they go to public places. Many refuse to wear one to avoid drawing attention, which may be why Carol doesn't wear one. Some people at the MCS support group do wear a mask. Carol apparently wore one on the flight to Albuquerque, though we only see it around her neck while in the taxi.

The social interaction Carol has with other people at the MCS support meeting is an accurate version of the lingo used. It also shows the breadth of people who get MCS, not just personalities like Carol's.



Some reviewers call what happens to Carol at the baby shower a panic attack or an anxiety attack. It looks more like an asthma attack. Carol subsequently tells her doctor she had asthma as a child.

Carol's encounter with physicians who are clueless about MCS and irresponsibly diagnose MCS as psychiatric is all too common. It is often from other MCS patients that people hear about the few physicians who specialize in MCS cases (they are organized by the American Academy of Environmental Medicine).

Carol is shown craving milk. When the environmental physician tests her for allergies, it turns out she is strongly allergic to the milk she craves. It is common to be allergic to the foods we crave.

Carol's illness comes on gradually over three or four months. Some people get full onset overnight while for others it takes multiple years to slowly get that sick. Most people with MCS have a milder version that does not require the severe lifestyle changes shown in the movie.

Though the first half of the film may seem overly dramatic to outsiders, it is actually just a few times *Safe* goes beyond what commonly happens to people with severe MCS. The nosebleed Carol gets in the hair salon and the ambulance ride are such extremes.

Departing from reality

The second half of *Safe* departs from real-life MCS. There have never been any New Age camps for people with environmental illness. In the 1990s there were three rustic camps in the United States, but they were not like Wrenwood. Their purpose was simply to provide housing to people who had to flee their homes.

Haynes didn't film any of the real MCS camps and didn't have the budget to build one, so he rented a regular camp in California. The real MCS camps were much smaller, didn't have such a nice common building, no common meals, no rules separating the sexes, no lectures, and no cult figures.

In two of the real MCS camps people lived in porcelain huts, though their designs were different than the Wrenwood huts. The third camp was a campground for travel trailers. Wrenwood is a luxury resort compared to the real-life MCS camps.

Cars were also prohibited at the MCS camps, where fences blocked the cars. At Wrenwood there was just a small "no cars" sign at the entrance, which the taxi driver ignored and was yelled at by a woman upset about the car exhaust (car exhaust is cleaner today than it was in 1987).

Most people do not have the money to go to an expensive place like Wrenwood. They often cannot even afford to rent or buy a house built of non-toxic materials. Many people with severe MCS lose their jobs and have to live in cars, travel trailers or government housing that doesn't really serve their needs. Carol travels first class in this movie.



In the end Carol becomes so sensitive that she is affected by her husband's cologne, even though he is not wearing any. Outsiders would likely consider that a sign of anxiety, but people who regularly wear cologne (or other potent fragrances) smell of it for months after they stop using it, and so do their clothes despite many washings. Fragrances are absorbed into the body and slowly released over time. People who do not have severe MCS won't even notice.

Carol is visibly thinner at the end, which is common, but it is rare that someone gets lesions on their face.

The controversies

When the film came out it generated controversy within the MCS community. Some people liked it, most hated it. Some saw it as supportive of the MCS struggle while others pointed to the parts that could be interpreted as meaning MCS is a psychological illness.

What was Todd Haynes trying to say with this film?

Why was Carol chosen to be such a passive, apathetic character living a joyless empty life? It is easy for a viewer to write off someone like Carol as being anxious, neurotic and having panic attacks and thereby labelling MCS as a psychiatric illness.

What was the intent with the cultish Wrenwood camp? Was that a way to smear MCS with that sort of pop psychology?

Todd Haynes was interviewed about *Safe* in the summer 1995 issue of BOMB, a magazine covering the art world. Here he said he was inspired to make the film when he read *The AIDS Book: Creating a Positive Approach*, by Louise Hay. Her book stated that if people loved themselves they would not get sick with AIDS, and if they had AIDS they could overcome it if they loved themselves.

When the book came out there was no treatment for AIDS so people were desperate and Hay's various books gained a strong following among gay men.

Todd Haynes was horrified and started to look into the New Age culture that emphasized this sort of thing. He visited a well-known New Age retreat center, which he used as a model for Wrenwood, including the house rules with quiet meals, subdued clothing and the separation of the sexes. Wrenwood and its guru is a satirical version of the New Age movement.

Haynes heard about MCS when he watched some tabloid TV program about it that he found scary. In the interview he was careful not to say whether he thought MCS was all psychological or not, though it seems he thought it was some of both. This is reflected in the movie, which is ambiguous as well. In the interview he said that people with MCS "really aren't the target of any specific critique in the film."

As for Carol's personality, Haynes wanted someone ordinary: "There are many more people like her in the world than the ones with strong personalities we're used to seeing on film."

Also, "she's lost at the beginning and at the end of the film. The film is a very sad circle that returns her to a perfectly sealed off version of where she started. There's some hope in the middle of the film, when she goes to this [support] group and begins to take steps out of her protected, isolated world."

And later: “*Safe* is on the side of the disease and not the cure. It’s the disease that completely opens Carol’s eyes ... and the cure that returns her to this sealed-off existence.”

The cover of the 2014 re-release of the film states: “*Safe* functions on multiple levels: as a prescient commentary on self-help culture, as a metaphor for the AIDS crisis, as a drama about class and social estrangement, and as a horror film about what you cannot see.”

The connection between MCS and AIDS

The film uses MCS as a metaphor for AIDS, which was the big public health issue in 1987. The only explicit mention of AIDS is that the Wrenwood guru has both MCS and AIDS.

Todd Haynes was an activist with the ACT UP group during the 1980s. ACT UP loudly demonstrated for AIDS to be taken seriously since there was no cure and it was ignored by the authorities. AIDS was seen as a “gay disease” and the politics of the 1980s did not allow officials to talk about gays as that would imply that they existed. The HBO movie *And The Band Played On* covers this issue from the perspective of a hardy group of epidemiologists within the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) who were refused any funding to battle the epidemic because of politics.

The book *And The Band Played On* mentions that several doctors considered AIDS a psychological problem for a while, but it was hard to argue with dead bodies. AIDS was finally taken seriously once it had killed more than ten thousand people in the United States alone and was affecting people outside the gay community.

There are many similarities between the stories of MCS and AIDS. They both have elements of immune dysfunction that challenged the medical dogma, both produced symptoms that could vary widely from patient to patient, and both faced stiff resistance. Both illnesses have caused many families to disown their sick. MCS never had the body count that AIDS did and is still largely ignored by the public health authorities.

The article *MCS Under Siege* by Dr. Ann McCampbell (Townsend Letter, January 2001) describes how MCS is a direct threat to the chemical industry and others, and thus a political disease actively opposed by special interests. They are still

very successful in painting MCS as a psychological issue and prevent funding for independent research.

People who are very sick do not have the luxury of waiting many years for the scientists to produce a cure, so AIDS patients tried all sorts of alternative treatments. *Safe* shows some of that, while the movie *Dallas Buyers Club* shows a lot more. MCS patients have also tried many things on their own, though these stories have not yet been told and need to wait until MCS can be presented as an accepted disease in a film or TV show. Just imagine if *Dallas Buyers Club* presented AIDS as a possibly imagined illness, like *Safe* presents MCS.

When people got MCS in the 1980s they often worried that they had gotten AIDS, as the initial symptoms are similar. There was some communication between the MCS and AIDS communities in San Francisco and ACT UP did do one happening to help the MCS sufferers disrupt a medical conference in 1990.

The impact of *Safe*

Films and TV shows are powerful media that shapes how people think about themselves and others. When Hollywood decided to stop portraying LGBTQ people as weirdos and instead started producing shows with ordinary and likeable characters, such as on *Will and Grace* and later *Modern Family*, it did wonders for public acceptance.

When there is a new movie or media report about MCS it is always the hope that it can help raise awareness about the issue. Awareness is important as it can help get funding for medical research to find out what causes the illness, how to treat it, and how to prevent it. Research that is almost completely lacking. And family and friends may accept the illness instead of writing off the sick person as mentally ill. Awareness can also help people with MCS gain access to hospitals, clinics, and many other places that ordinary people take for granted they can enter whenever they wish.

Safe was voted the best film of the 1990s in a *Village Voice* poll of film critics. It has been re-released multiple times and is still mentioned in the media. The Austin Film Society held a public screening in 2016, followed by a panel discussion with two physicians and a film maker. But *Safe* failed to raise awareness. Very telling is a 2014 interview on *The Dissolve* with Scott Tobias, where the film is referred to as “science fiction.” The journalist failed to understand that MCS was, and is, a real illness.

It is clear that *Safe* is not a film to educate about MCS. It leaves it up to the viewer to decide whether MCS is psychological or not, unlike most movies and television that intentionally guides the viewer to arrive at a certain opinion. Unfortunately, it seems that most viewers – and reviewers – tend to interpret MCS as psychological. (The review in *TIME* magazine called it an “out-of-mind experience” and that she “freaks out on the 20th century.”) Of course, it is an illusion that a film can provide enough information to make such a determination.

Safe tries to be neutral, but as death-camp survivor Elie Wiesel said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.”

The film is not really about MCS, but uses MCS as a conveniently mysterious disease that propels Carol White out of her suburban cocoon and into another cocoon.

It had been better if Todd Haynes had made up a fictitious illness instead of using MCS as a metaphor. The world is still not ready for this film.

Haynes later made the film *Still Alice* about a woman who struggles with Alzheimer’s. She is portrayed as a popular and very capable university professor whom anybody can sympathize with. If the Alice character had gotten MCS instead of Alzheimer’s, viewers would be more sympathetic towards MCS than *Safe* leaves them.

Subtitles

The first DVD release (about 2001) had English subtitles, which are essential for people who are hearing impaired or sound sensitive. The 2014 re-release on DVD by the Criterion collection has no subtitles!

About the reviewer

The author has had MCS for two decades himself and has met hundreds of people with the illness. He has visited two MCS camps and knows people who lived in a third. He has discussed the movie *Safe* with one of the people Todd Haynes interviewed in Los Angeles when he gathered information for the film script.

Information consulted about the film includes two interviews with Todd Haynes (in 1995 and 2014), some movie reviews, and a recording of Haynes and Julianne Moore commenting on the movie as it plays (DVD version).

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