

Cultures of Toxicity Call for Papers



In Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe*, Carol (Julianne Moore) is plagued by 'multiple chemical sensitivities'. The character experiences her environment as a series of toxic threats that cause accumulating and varied physical and psychological consequences. The film concludes with Carol holed up, alone, in an antiseptic pod in a therapeutic community in the desert. She will be safe here, as long as she remains insulated against the ever-increasing threats of the contemporary world. Thus, it is only through a radically diminished life of social and cultural isolation that Carol can survive and be 'well'. *Safe*, then, raises a series of questions about the nature and value of toxicity, vulnerability, safety, and resilience that have become culturally central in the twenty-first century.

This conference aims to explore the concept of toxicity in relation to a number of contemporary political concerns including culture, health, economics, gender, and ecology. We are concerned to examine how cultural practices (from theatre to graphic fiction) and critical methodologies, for example in performance studies, are contributing to, and intervening in, contemporary anxieties about safety, risk and toxicity.

This conference brings together a number of distinct but interlocking ideas. There is a striking contemporary habit to identify phenomena as toxic – from masculinity to assets, from cultures to environments. In this way, 'toxic' no longer simply refers to specific physical substances but rather to practices, attitudes, structures and more. Such practices serve to constitute people as multiply helpless, liable to plural risks and dangers. Discourses in health and wellbeing movements, for example, frequently reinforce images of people as vulnerable and promote forms of individualised

self-governance and vigilance that obscure real social and political processes. Related, in the global north, we are living through a period of renewed debates about freedom of speech, trigger warnings, and safe spaces on campuses and beyond, all of which tacitly frame art and ideas as potential threats. In this regard, contemporary individuality involves becoming a watchful and resilient guard of one's sovereign bodily security against infinite and immaterial dangers. Toxicity is, then, both concrete and atmospheric.

What is at stake in such images, narratives, and metaphors of toxicity? How far does describing something like masculinity as 'toxic' efface questions of ethics, power, patriarchy and reinscribe womanhood (and other marginalised categories of identity) as inevitably vulnerable? To what degree does toxicity reproduce attitudes to identity and history that are both individualising and fatalistic? In what ways does the notion of 'safety' operate as a means to neutralise political complaint or resistance? Or might the language of toxicity be politically generative, insisting on the real-world effects of patterns of behaviour, structures of economic speculation and disparate practices of environmental depletion? Does toxicity expose faultlines in cultural norms, understandings, and values? Put simply, what does toxicity *mean* and what does it *do*? How is toxicity produced, sustained, and distributed? The conference thus seeks to examine what lies beneath labels of toxicity and interrogate the complex politics of threat, vulnerability, safety, and resistance.

We invite papers of 20 minutes that respond to notions of cultures of toxicity in relation to a wide range of areas including:

- Arts, culture, and performance
- Gender and sexuality
- Health and wellbeing
- Education and pedagogy
- Environments and ecologies
- Structures and systems
- Government and policy
- Political organisation and expression
- Economics and finance
- Communities and cultures

The conference will take place at the University of Warwick on Friday 8th and Saturday 9th November 2019. We would like to receive abstracts of no more than 300 words with an accompanying bio of up to 150 words by 31st March 2019. Please send your abstract and any questions to a.r.harpin@warwick.ac.uk and d.rebellato@rhul.ac.uk