



## Lost in a Masquerade

The light and airy confections of *The Carpenters* iced over dark family secrets. Cathy Lomax considers the plight of a perfect Superstar made plastic.

*'I feel like I'm disappearing, getting smaller every day But I look in the mirror and I'm bigger in every way' 'Tonic (Song For Karen)', Sonic Youth, 1990*

*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* is a short film by Todd Haynes released in 1987 but withdrawn in 1990 after Haynes lost a copyright infringement law suit, filed by Karen's brother Richard.

*Superstar* takes its name from the 1971 hit song by The Carpenters – a wholesome, all-American, brother and sister pop duo from Downey, California. Karen who was the singer and drummer died in 1983 aged 33 from a heart attack as a consequence of anorexia nervosa. Her family have been reticent to talk much about her illness, hence their displeasure with Haynes's film, which although sympathetic to Karen, portrays them in a bad light. This is, however, just the small picture, what Haynes and co-writer Cynthia Schneider do is turn this personal tragedy into a critique of middle American values; the nuclear family, the pressure upon women to conform to a stereotype

and ultimately the American Dream as a whole.

The film uses dolls rather than actors to play the central characters (it has been called Barbie-mation), the few 'real people' are talking heads, commenting on general points about The Carpenters and anorexia in a moc doc style. As the story progresses and the corny teenage girl with the sophisticated voice becomes sicker – aided along the way by her mother's dismissive attitude to her appearance (one memorable scene has her coercing Karen into an unflattering pair of hip huggers) – her Barbie doll doppelganger is sliced and disfigured to mirror Karen's emaciated body.

*Superstar's* anorexia story is heartbreakingly powerful, with explanations about how not eating is often the result of a highly controlled familial environment. The sufferer, in desperation, takes the only control they can – over their own body – starving themselves and producing exhilarating highs.

The plastic forms of the doll actors are used as a metaphor for the artificial, squeaky clean public image forced upon Richard and Karen 'a

couple of kids from next door'. The duo's darker private lives are hinted at throughout by Karen's disturbing S&M visions and Richard's implied homosexuality. It is, however, the soundtrack of superficially banal Carpenter's lyrics, sung by a disfigured Barbie doll with an impossibly sad, deep, dreamy, chocolaty smooth voice which provides the melancholic poignancy.

Haynes has said: 'The early '70s had felt like the last moment of pure, popular culture fantasy and fake-ness that I shared with my parents, when we were united in this image of happy American family-hood. And the Carpenters' music seemed especially emblematic of that time.'<sup>1</sup> *Superstar* reveals the real Carpenters, and debunks another pop culture myth, adding one more nail to the artificial coffin that contains the shiny veneer of mid-20th century hubris.

**'Superstar The Karen Carpenter Story' can be watched online in bootleg versions of varying quality.**

[1] Chuck Stephens, *Gentlemen Prefer Haynes*, *Film Comment*, Vol. 31, No. 4, July/August 1995

Top: Cathy Lomax, '29.1.1.10 She was getting thinner', 2010, oil on paper, 23x30.5cm. Bottom: Cathy Lomax, '29.1.1.10 Her voice was like smooth dark chocolate', 2010, oil on paper, 23x30.5cm.

