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## **Allergic to the Twentieth Century: Intentional Communities and Therapeutic Landscapes in The Village and Safe**

***David Bell***

### **Opening Scenes**

An unnamed village in rural Pennsylvania, 1897. The funeral of a member of the village community, a young man, son of two of the Elders, founders of the community. The village is surrounded by woods that the villagers are forbidden from entering, as they contain mysterious, frightening creatures, known by locals as Those We Don't Speak Of. Otherwise, the village is a functional tight-knit community, vaguely Shaker-like in its appearance, with a small population headed by a group of Elders, their nominal leader being Edward Walker.

San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, 1987. Carol and Greg White, two well-to-do middle-class suburbanites, arrive at their new home. As Carol enters the large, plush interior, she sneezes. She is an affluent suburban homemaker going about her privileged daily life – overseeing furniture deliveries, going to the gym, drifting through her home, having her hair done. But Carol begins to develop assorted symptoms of an undefined illness: one day, driving on the freeway, the traffic fumes around her cause her to break out into uncontrollable coughing.

In this paper, I offer up an analysis of two films, *The Village* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2004) and *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995), both of which centre, in rather different ways, on the problems of contemporary life, and both of which offer what Susan Potter (2004: 141) calls “spatial solutions” to those problems. The films are chosen because they emerge from a relatively similar cultural context – late-modern US film culture – and speak to a particular set of concerns about the hazards of modern life, offering up a spatial solution by removing their

protagonists to an intentional community in a rural setting. My analysis considers movies as particularly rich cultural texts that allow audiences to explore imaginatively aspects of their own experiences. The reading of the films is grounded in several bodies of work: it is a contribution to the ongoing discussion of “rural representation” that explores how particular rural landscapes and environments are depicted in literary and media texts, and the cultural and social work that these representations do (Fish 2007; Fowler & Helfield 2006). It draws on research in health geography about therapeutic landscapes and healing places (Gesler 2003; Williams 1999, 2007) and on work in rural studies on back to the land movements, voluntary simplicity advocates and intentional communities based in rural locales (Boal et al 2012; Halfacree 2006, 2007; Meijering et al 2007; Vannini & Taggart 2013). And, of course, it builds on existing discussions of the two films, bringing them into productive contact by exploring common themes and divergences. Both films stage spatial solutions to various troubles, anxieties and illnesses associated with modern urban life, but both also offer a critique of the strategy of “remove” – to use the term of voluntary simplicity and off-gridding – that results in their central characters’ relocation to particular “village” environments. The main themes developed in my analysis centre on how characters in the films deal with their condition – of being, in different ways, “allergic to the twentieth century”.

### **A Safe Haven in Troubled Times**

Readers unfamiliar with *The Village*, and with writer/director M. Night Shyamalan’s “cinema of misdirection” formula, will be puzzling about my opening discussion: how can a film about late nineteenth-century rural Pennsylvania offer up a critique of modern urban life? At the risk of spoiling the pleasure of the plot-twist, the audience eventually discovers that the movie is not set in 1897, but in the present day.[1] The village is actually a simulacrum, a reconstruction built by the group of Elders under the guidance of history professor Edward Walker. The Elders had met at a counselling centre in Philadelphia – each had experienced

violent personal tragedy in their lives. Walker used his family wealth to establish a “wildlife preserve”, and the village is hidden away deep within it. The myth of Those We Don’t Speak Of has been fabricated to stop villagers from going into the woods and potentially to what are known only as the towns– described by one Elder as “wicked places where wicked people live”. The boundary of the village is ultimately breached when a young villager, Lucius Hunt, is mortally wounded. Ivy, the blind daughter of Edward Walker (who is in love with Lucius), persuades her father that she should be allowed to go to the towns to fetch medicine. Edward reveals to her (and to the audience) the deception at the heart of the community – that the creatures are not real and that she can safely travel beyond the woods. Ivy makes the journey, encountering a creature in the woods (actually the local “village idiot”, Noah Percy, using one of the creature costumes that the Elders have devised to conjure sightings of Those We don’t Speak Of). Ivy finds the fence that marks the boundary of the wildlife preserve, meets a somewhat bemused security guard who provides her with medication, and returns to save Lucius. This breaching of the border and the revelation of the “truth” of the village to Ivy causes the Elders to ponder their decision to retreat from modern life, but they reaffirm their desire to keep the village as it is.

*The Village* thus centres on a particular form of “spatial solution” to the violence of modern urban life: a retreat back into history, back to a simple, ascetic, placid and tight-knit community (Bida 2014). Edward Walker mixes elements of the US history he previously taught at university, especially picking tropes from seventeenth-century puritanism and nineteenth-century utopian communities -- and Shyamalan adds a third historical strand, of “1970s despair” in urban America via the backstory of the Elders (see Coats et al 2008: 363). He and his fellow Elders model an idealised, idyllic rural life that involves an almost total removal from contemporary social, economic and political life (though each home contains a memory box with keepsakes from each Elder’s past) and the creation of a whole way of life entirely contained within the village. Invented traditions and the mythologies of the creatures and the towns keep all village members isolated, in blissful ignorance (though fearful of Those We Don’t Speak Of and their occasional capacity for symbolic violence).

*Safe* deploys a similar narrative of remove, though the first half of the film is set in suburban San Fernando Valley, and follows Carol White and her developing illness. Her inchoate symptoms and uncertain aetiology lead her from modern biomedicine (which can only offer psychiatric solutions) into the world of patient activism and self-help, and ultimately to her own act of remove – she self-diagnoses her condition as multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) and, via a support group, finds out about the Wrenwood Institute, an isolated desert commune in Albuquerque, New Mexico headed by Peter Dunning. There, fellow sufferers have created a “safe space” away from the toxins and allergens that they believe have made them ill. Dunning proffers a grab-bag of New Age and self-help “sermons” and group therapies, urging Wrenwood members to look inside themselves for a cure. Carol continues to deteriorate, and eventually moves into a tiny, porcelain lined igloo-like “safe house”. Previous analyses of *Safe* have interrogated the construction of modern suburban life as toxic, and have shown how MCS is constructed as being “allergic to the twentieth century” and particularly to the everyday spaces and material culture of domesticity (Christian 2004; Kollin 2002; Potter 2004). In my analysis, I largely confine discussion to Carol’s remove to Wrenwood, and the depiction of this intentional community – advertised as “A safe haven in troubled times”. In fact, that tagline seems appropriate to both films, for similar and different reasons, and in the remainder of this paper I will interweave analysis of the two films with the literatures waymarked in the introduction.

### **Therapeutic Landscapes, Intentional Communities and the Rural**

As noted earlier, in my analysis I draw on two key concepts, one from health geography and the other from rural studies. Here I want to briefly review their literatures. Wilbert Gesler began to elaborate the notion of therapeutic landscapes in the early 1990s, bringing insights from the then new cultural geography into contact with medical geography (Gesler 1992). Gesler has further developed and expanded the concept since, and his ideas have inspired a wide range of studies of many different landscapes and “healing places”. Reflecting on these

developments in an editorial, Gesler notes important qualifications to the concept, for example in studies that focus on landscape experiences, on imaginative geographies (such as those in novels), and those that show that the therapeutic capacity of a landscape or place is contextual and relational – landscapes can be healthful for some people but harmful for others (Gesler 2005). In an edited collection that surveyed the field a decade ago, further developments and elaborations were mapped (Williams 2007), including important applied work in the design of healthcare sites and studies focused on particular (often marginalized) populations, while a recent paper discussing “edgelands” – interstitial micro-spaces between urban and rural – provides a timely literature review of the concept, drawing attention (again) to imaginative geographies or “therapeutic mindscapes”, to the need to explore “ordinary” places as potentially therapeutic landscapes (or sites for therapeutic landscape experiences), and noting research on “alternative” therapeutic landscapes or different understandings and uses of spaces as healthful or harmful (Houghton & Houghton 2014).

The discussion of “edgelands” takes us to the rural – if not in stereotypical ways – and therefore reminds us of the enduring (if contested) understanding of the therapeutic/healthful potential of the countryside and the wilderness. This has been an enduring strand of therapeutic landscapes research, whether looking at the generalized notion of the therapeutic value of nature, or in studies focused on particular landscapes and practices. Of course, it is important to ask contextual and relational questions here, too – and both *Safe* and *The Village* raise questions of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and non-belonging. While Carol *should* feel at home in middle-class suburbia, her domestic environment and daily life become increasingly unhomely, harmful, leading to her remove to Wrenwood. Here Carol tries to find a healthful home, or at least a safe space where she can focus on becoming well again through intense inward focus. Wrenwood presents a very different landscape of isolated cabins and safe houses, plus a communal activity centre for austere, silent, sex-segregated meals, group therapy sessions (and one rather awkward birthday disco). Wrenwood doesn’t represent a rural idyll in the conventional sense – it is somewhat ramshackle (apart from Dunning’s mansion), located in the New Mexico desert but never able to totally escape modernity (out walking one day, Carol stumbles upon a

highway, and reacts bodily to the fumes; at other moments, planes are heard flying overhead). So perhaps Wrenwood is a kind of “edgeland” – not a pristine wilderness, but an unruly space in-between where one might (as Carol and Dunning do) encounter a coyote one moment, a truck on the highway the next. And its residents are equally atypical of idyllic rurality: they are ex-urbanites seeking safety through isolation, not engaging with the rural landscape other than as a space assumed to be free of the toxins of urban living. Theirs is a very particular form of counterurbanization.

This depiction stands in stark contrast to the community in *The Village*. Here, more idyllic trappings of rural life have been assembled by the Elders, cherry-picking aspects of the American past to recreate and rescale community life (Murphy 2013). *The Village* depicts a bucolic, pastoral, agrarian life of simple pleasures and orderly social relations. Of course, maintenance of that order relies on the myth of *Those We Don't Speak Of*, a shared belief in monsters in the woods that keeps the community effectively trapped, afraid to go beyond the village boundary. The woods that surround the village are reframed as a dangerous space, whereas this kind of landscape amenity might otherwise be characterised as healthful and healing (Milligan 2007). Monsters of many different forms have long performed boundary work, dwelling, as Jeffrey Cohen (1996: 7) puts it, “at the gates of difference”. *Those We Don't Speak Of* are an allegory of the dangerous difference and harms that urban life threatens (I will return to this point in the next section). In this regard, *The Village* is a kind of rural horror movie, offering both idyll and anti-idyll, or showing these to be two sides of the same coin – the idyll depends on the monsters even as it projects onto them everything that is anti-idyllic (Bell 1997; Murphy 2013). In fact, some critics argue that *Safe* is also a kind of horror film, perhaps belonging to the genre of “environmental horror” even though it refuses to resolve the question of what lies behind Carol’s condition and thereby to advance any explicit eco-criticism (Kollin 2002).

Both films complicate our understanding of the rural as a therapeutic landscape, therefore. And they do similar work with the notion of intentional communities. As discussed in rural studies, assorted back to the land movements have, since the inception of urban life, looked

back to rural life as similarly idyllic by virtue of being anti-urban, and have removed there to forge utopian communities and undertake experiments in living.[2] Keith Halfacree has been among those scholars interested in contemporary manifestations of this impulse, showing how various counter-cultural groups have chosen rural settings for these experiments, creating diverse “radical rural spaces” in the process (Halfacree 2006, 2007). He notes linkages in particular to the 1960s/1970s counterculture, though he argues that today’s back to the land movements are less concerned with “dropping out” and maintain connection to and engagement with the wider world. This is borne out in Vannini and Taggart’s study of “off-gridders” in remote Canada. Motivated by the idea(l)s of voluntary simplicity and self-sufficiency, off-gridders attempt to minimize their reliance on modern, “convenient” consumer culture, which they see as filled with “involuntary complexity” – a form of living “marked by waste, stress, greed, clutter, pollution, risk, anxiety, overpopulation, lack of personal control, global economic inequality, social fragmentation, and other well-known diseases of the modern condition” (Vannini & Taggart 2013: 303). While a central tenet of off-gridding is the notion of “remove” – a “spatial performance of self-distancing” (p. 308) – off-gridders mix elective and selective reclusiveness with chosen connections to modern life (such as the internet).

There are clear echoes of this social and spatial movement of remove in the narratives of *Safe* and *The Village*. Both films elaborate their own forms of off-gridding and voluntary simplicity, though both are underpinned by connections to modern life, whether acknowledged or hidden. As Meijering et al (2007: 49) note, withdrawal into intentional (rural) communities expresses dissatisfaction with “mainstream” modern life, but also frustration at being able to change society – the only viable option is to leave it (mostly) behind and instead “focus inwards on the restricted area of the community”. Intentional communities in rural settings, they add, frequently create communal rituals (such as shared meals), build new forms of living space, and recreate rural traditions. They are in this sense, both planned and total communities – small-scale, tight-knit, purposive and prefigurative. As Brian Hoey (2007: 304) writes, such communities often use “building plans and other spatial arrangements to both embody and advance their vision of a more perfect social collective”. Such orderly communities are attractive when “other social processes appear to



be in chaos". Such ordering and planning is of course also a matter of purification; of establishing insiders and outsiders, erecting borders and policing them. But what exactly is to be kept out of the intentional communities of *Safe* and *The Village*?

### **Social Toxins and Ecologies of Fear**

Both films are about fear and safety, as we have seen. *Safe* can be read as (at least on the surface) a movie about MCS, about being "allergic to the twentieth century" (on MCS see Alaimo 2009; Coyle 2004; Kroll-Smith & Floyd 1997; Murphy 2006). It is a story about environmental toxins, allergens and pollutants, and about what Joseph Dumit (2006) calls an "uncertain, emergent illness". MCS remains emergent, uncertain, contested, and *Safe* is equally ambivalent about the "real" causes of Carol's illness, only ever hinting at possible explanations. Even at Wrenwood, different aetiologies are offered, including those that root the sickness in the individual rather than broader society and/or environment. The "cure" is similarly elusive. While spatial removal – first to a de-toxified room in her home, then to a cabin at Wrenwood and finally to the igloo – is suggested as a route to recovery, the group therapy and Dunning's self-help sermons oscillate between external and internal registers. "The only person who can make you get sick is you", Dunning says at one point, and much of the talking cure concerns moving from self-hatred to self-love. Carol takes up this message, saying in a clumsy birthday speech that "I really hatred myself before I came here", and ending the film in her igloo, looking at her reflection in the mirror, intoning "I love you. I really love you".

However, alternative readings are offered up by the film's elusiveness, the most recurrent in scholarly discussion being the issues of "isolated privilege" and the question of Carol's identity. Drawing on Mike Davis, Susan Kollin (2002: 125) describes an "ecology of fear" in affluent, white, suburban Los Angeles: anxieties of class and race mixing, of urban unrest,

leave residents like Carol placing themselves under siege, “captive to their own fears about being safe”. The film raises the issue of “urbanoia”, white flight, segregation and social sterility. Carol’s surname (White) meanwhile gestures us towards whiteness as a theme, too (Davis 2000; Potter 2004), while the narrative further suggests that Carol struggles with her position in society as a dutiful wife, mother, homemaker (an embrace from her husband makes her physically sick). She inhabits not only toxic spaces but a “toxic subjectivity”, as Kollin puts it.

Not dissimilar anxieties pervade *The Village* and its inhabitants, though these are worked through (or worked on) in different ways by the characters and the narrative. After the narrative reveal, we are offered a less elusive resolution to the cause and cure of the condition endured knowingly by the Elders and unknowingly by all others (except, to some degree, by the “village idiot” Noah – trading on a recurrent “idiot savant” figure in rural horror; Bell 1997). Each Elder has experienced violent tragedy at the hands of unnamed others, in their previous urban lives – the rape and murder of a sister, the robbery-murder of a husband, the shooting of a father by his business partner. Meeting at a grief counselling centre, they agree to leave their modern lives and build an intentional community in total isolation. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman, Aleksandra Bida (2014: 125, 134) discusses the village community’s “complex agoraphobic ideology” and “mixophobia” – the latter a sociological concept of anxiety about social mixing (especially cross-class and race) that Bauman sees reflected in the rise of gated communities and the apparent desire for sameness and social homogeneity. Bida argues persuasively that *The Village* depicts a kind of gated community, in fact. Those We Don’t Speak Of can be seen in this way as a projection of the Other that must be expelled from the village in order to secure the safety of sameness (Cohen 1997).

The Elders have conspired not only to tell stories about these creatures, but to stage occasional incursions into the village with the help of frightening howls, bizarre costumes and undecipherable markings left on house doors. When the alarm is raised from one of the guard towers that circle the village, and the bells toll, the villagers enact something akin to

the Cold War's three-minute warning drill (Davis 2007): they dash indoors, close the shutters, and descend into the cellars of their houses.[3] While within the historical framing of late nineteenth-century America, the creatures are readable as Native Americans (Coats et al 2008), our contemporary audience reading can see a different "monstrous difference" embodied in *Those We Don't Speak Of*. Cohen (1997: 20) concludes his discussion of monsters by writing that "they ask us why we have created them". And this is a question that hangs allegorically over *The Village* just as it hangs over its inhabitants. The creatures have been used to fabricate a seemingly more benign ecology of fear in order to protect the villagers from the real horrors of modern urban life.

### **Medical Boundaries and Healthy Spaces**

As noted, a key plotline in *The Village* concerns Edward Walker's decision to permit his daughter Ivy to leave the village and go to the towns to purchase medicines that might save Lucius, who she is soon to marry. This moment has been preceded in the film by a request to the Elders from Lucius himself to leave the village for medicines, a request denied. The issue of modern medicine that *The Village* raises goes beyond Lucius, who suggests to Ivy that appropriate medical care could have saved August Nicholson's son, whose funeral opens the film, as well as potentially saving Ivy Walker's sight and helping ease Noah's (unspecified) condition. That Walker would not permit access to modern medicines previously reveals an unspoken rift between him and the other Elders, though they ultimately resolve to stay together as a community. In this way, *The Village* uses modern medicine as little more than a plot device – a way to reveal the twist – and does not question the efficacy of biomedicine itself. Like the off-gridders discussed earlier, here is one connection to modernity that the community is ultimately able and willing to retain. A very different trajectory is followed by *Safe*. Carol's illness is dismissed by her physician (who suggests only psychiatric treatment), and an important part of the narrative concerns Carol's search for answers about her condition, its causes and cure. Through a chance

encounter with a notice on a bulletin board she finds a self-help group, and through them enters the MCS community and ultimately Wrenwood.

Emergent illnesses like MCS perform a very different sort of boundary work, therefore. They trouble the boundaries of conventional biomedical knowledge, offering up lay expertise to confound medical opinion. As Michelle Murphy (2006: 151) writes, “MCS does not conform to the biomedical logics already available for categorizing bodily states, nor does it conform to biomedical expectations of what a body is supposed to be able to do”. Within the MCS community, spatial tactics of retreat and withdrawal are a prominent response to the illness (Coyle 2004). MCS exists on contested terrain, making retreat sometimes the *only* option – retreat not just from the toxic environment but also from the toxic judgements of biomedicine and of those who believe its diagnoses. As Kroll-Smith and Floyd (1997: xii) summarize: “MCs is demanding that the biomedical model itself change to accommodate its peculiar aetiology and pathophysiology. ... An antidote for MCS is not likely to be found through pharmaceutical research or invasive surgeries; nothing less than changing conventional understandings of what are safe and dangerous places and things found in them will abate this illness”. This latter demand is especially resonant with my discussion, and links it back to the contextual and relational understanding of therapeutic landscapes: spaces that should be experienced as safe – the clean, modern home for example – become dangerous for those with MCS. The prognosis is clear: we have made our most intimate and ordinary spaces unliveable. Hence the common response of retreat, of seeking “spatial solutions” to the illness. So, while modern medicine is the prompt to breach the boundary in *The Village*, in *Safe* it is modern medicine that polices boundaries – around what counts as an illness (Dumit 2006). When Ivy encounters a creature in the woods (actually Noah in a costume) she says to herself “It is not real”. In one sense, Carol’s quest is to be able to say of her illness, “It is real”, and to have that realness acknowledged.

Carol’s igloo at Wrenwood is, as Potter (2004: 145) puts it, “the ultimate condensation of the spatially oriented therapies” offered by *Safe*. It is tiny – only room enough for very basic amenities, and definitely a space for only one person. It contrasts starkly with Carol’s

expansive, open-plan San Fernando home as depicted in the first half of the film. It feels like a cocoon, a bunker, or a cell. Its curious form, building materials and sparse interior have a look of ascetic minimal modernism – its dome seems almost geodesic, its form echoing the Futuro cabin or other futuristic housing experiments of the mid-twentieth century (Home & Taanila 2002; Leslie 2006). As a therapeutic landscape, at one level it seems fitting, and certainly fit for purpose, designed with the patient’s healing in mind. But, we know that Carol was only able to move in because the previous occupant had died. Just as Carol shows no signs of any improved health from her time at Wrenwood, the igloo has no credence as a space of actual healing. The presence of a mirror inside is especially revealing of the inward direction of Wrenwood’s healing programme, its emphasis on self-examination and self-love.

The architecture of healing in *The Village* is evident less in particular buildings than in the overall plan of the settlement, with its recreation of a human-scaled, liveable place centred on a church-like community meeting house.[4] Outdoor communal meals are a feature of life in the village, enabling everyone to be together, to eat and talk. Other elements of the built landscape are more ominous: the watchtowers that circle the village, a prison-like “quiet room” in which Noah is locked after he is uncovered as the perpetrator of Lucius’s stabbing, and the solid, modern 8-foot fence that Ivy must scale to leave the woods and reach the towns. The village is no less of a cocoon, then, than Carol’s igloo. It represents a similar “spatial solution” and its boundaries must similarly be policed, its insides kept pure and clean. The Elders’ memory boxes in each home are symbolic of this purification.

### **Elsewheres within Here**

Support groups figure in both films as key encounters: it is through contact with an MCS group that Carol learns of Wrenwood, and begins to develop an understanding of her

condition, while the Elders of the village met at a grief counselling centre. However, in both cases, the support group encounter leads to withdrawal, not political activism: meeting others with similar experiences doesn't provoke demands for social change, only a shared desire to escape. As Kroll-Smith and Floyd (1997) note, such a response is only one strand of MCS activism – and Dumit (2006) also shows how patient activism around illnesses like MCS can mobilize for social and political change. Nevertheless, in *Safe* we are not witness to such alternatives; even at the support group, there is no interaction between members, who instead sit in silence watching a video by Dunning (Lynch 2002). Yet both films are critical of the strategy of withdrawal, especially of the privilege it relies on. This is arguably most evident in *The Village*. As other commentators have noted, no mention is made of economic activity (except for a few images of agrarianism) and, while the inhabitants seem not to have a money economy (Ivy pays for the medicines with a pocket watch), the village is decked out like a period homes magazine celebrating Shaker style (or like a “living museum” or a film set).[5] Where did the building materials, furniture, clothes come from? After the reveal, we learn from conversations between the security guards that Walker used his late father's fortune to establish the wildlife preserve in which the village is hidden, to pay for security patrols, and also for the rerouting of aircraft so that none fly overhead to disrupt the simulacrum. Evidently, substantial economic privilege underpins the voluntary simplicity of the village. In a brief analysis, Slavoj Zizek (2008: 23) brings this home:

is the point of *The Village* not precisely to demonstrate that, today, a return to an authentic community ... is a fake which can only be staged as a spectacle for the very rich? The exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on.

Michelle Murphy (2006) describes MCS strategies as attempts to create “elsewheres within here”, and this seems a good summary of the strategy of the Elders, too: they have the money and privilege to withdraw to their gated community hidden within a wildlife preserve, their reconstruction of a simpler, better life. So *The Village* is marked by both nostalgia and a kind of homesickness – a longing for an imagined past in an imagined place (Bida 2014). Homesickness takes on a different meaning in *Safe*: when home can make you sick, what can you do? Like the Elders, Carol’s answer is to remove herself, as if she can *somewhere* find a place uncontaminated by modernity. In this respect, *Safe* raises the same question as *The Village*. As Kollin (2002: 134) summarizes, *Safe* asks “which populations are privileged enough to imagine themselves as safe from environmental concerns? What kind of people are able to believe that they can be shielded from ecological hazards that do not respect social borders and boundaries?” Yet even the isolation of Wrenwood is not untouched by the twentieth century – Dunning lacks Walker’s power to reroute planes, heard overhead during an outdoor group therapy session. And Wrenwood does not seek to recreate some lost Eden, not quite.

Intentional rural communities are seen in both films to offer only a partial and privileged solution to the problems of modern life, and the question of who such landscapes are therapeutic for – the relational, contextual question increasingly raised in other studies – is implicitly raised. We don’t of course know if Carol ever did recover, and though we see the Elders agreeing to continue life in the village, we do not know the effect of Ivy’s boundary breach. *The Village* and *Safe* are of course culturally specific, speaking to anxieties about late twentieth century US life; nevertheless, they tap into a more widespread and long-running cultural critique of rural communities and especially of intentional communities as spaces of withdrawal from modernity’s problems. And both films reaffirm that, at least for some people, modern urban life is “toxic” – though broader solutions beyond the act of remove are not suggested. Not everyone can buy a wildlife preserve and build a village, or even leave their “toxic” home and relocate to the desert.

## Notes

1: an edited volume on Shyamalan's movies is subtitled *Spoiler Warnings* (Weinstock 2010).

2: not all intentional communities are rural, of course; see Manzella (2010).

3: on analysis of the film as a post 9/11 allegory about "homeland security" see Collier (2008). Note also that Carol's igloo bears a strong resemblance to the fallout shelters photographed in Ross (2004). It is, Potter writes, "a battened-down place of isolation and paranoia" (2004: 145).

4: in this regard, there are similarities with the new urbanism's nostalgic rebuilding of community – see Hoey (2007).

5: it also reminds me of the village of Pleasant Valley encountered in the horror film *Two Thousand Maniacs!* and its later remake *2001 Maniacs* – a village whose residents turn out to be the vengeful, murderous ghosts of Civil War dead.

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