



Carol, directed by Todd Haines [Review]

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URGENT ADAPTATION

KOSUKE FUJIKI

Carol.

Dir. Todd Haynes. 2015.
The Weinstein Company.

Though remaining a faithful literary adaptation, Todd Haynes's sixth feature, *Carol* (2015), maintains its appeal to contemporary audiences by breathing new life into Patricia Highsmith's original novel. The film's vivacity is conveyed not only by the meticulously crafted *mise-en-scène* (especially the décor and costumes, which add visually pleasing period details to the screen) but also by Carter Burwell's poignant musical score which gives expressive voice to the characters' unspoken emotions and thoughts. Therese Belivet (Rooney Mara) is an aspiring photographer working temporarily at the toy section of a Manhattan department store where she meets and falls in love with Carol Aird (Cate Blanchett), a well-to-do housewife undergoing a divorce. Both Blanchett and Mara convincingly convey the emotional intensity of the central couple through their subtle gestures and restrained actions. In this manner, they contribute rich physical substance to Carol and Therese's discreet romance, beginning with a gentle caress of the shoulder and ultimately culminating in the sensuality of a love scene where tactile sensations are fostered through close-ups of the skin and body parts.

However, what is most noteworthy about Haynes's adaptation of this work by one of the best suspense writers of the twentieth century is his abundant use of film noir iconography for transferring onto the screen the compelling force of the source, a novel which has been described as having 'the drive of a thriller but the imagery of a romance.'¹ Cinephilic nods to film noir abound in Haynes's *Carol*: the private eye, the gun, motel rooms, recurrent scenes of the car, the flashback structure, and an excerpt from the Billy Wilder classic *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Even at the opening, where the camera follows an unidentified man concealed in a trench coat and fedora, we see the urban bustle, the iconic period costume, and the dexterous camera movement reminiscent of *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958), all together attesting to a nostalgic obsession with the noir genre. However, what may perplex the audience is that the generic expectations built up by the

¹ Val McDermid, 'Foreword' in *Carol* [formerly titled *The Price of Salt*] by Patricia Highsmith (1952; repr., London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. vii.

film prove to be only a façade. Unlike in his earlier *Far from Heaven* (2002), a faithful reworking of 1950s melodrama, Haynes makes his generic allusions in *Carol* incongruous for the genre of romance films. Haynes's film is not so much a crime thriller as it is a story of love between two women; the gun in the film turns out to be unloaded; the man whom we follow in the extensive opening shot proves to have little significance to the rest of the film; and, most importantly, the film ends not with a heap of dead bodies, but with a hopeful touch.

This generic mismatch serves to underscore the conflict between the protagonists and their harsh surroundings. The hint of darkness created by the noir references seems to emblemise the hostility of social perceptions toward homosexuality in the 1950s, when sodomy laws were still enforceable in most states and gay culture remained on the invisible peripheries of the society. In 1952 when Patricia Highsmith published her second novel *The Price of Salt*, on which Haynes's film is based, she felt compelled to do so under the pseudonym of 'Claire Morgan.' At that time, homosexual characters in fiction usually faced a doomed fate, as Highsmith recalls in her afterword to the 1991 reissue of the novel: 'Prior to this book, homosexuals male and female in American novels had had to pay for their deviation by cutting their wrists, drowning themselves in a swimming pool, or by switching to heterosexuality (so it was stated), or by collapsing [...] into a depression equal to hell.'² Highsmith's—and by extension, Haynes's—refusal to offer another gay tragedy can be seen in the love-struck couple's ultimate triumph over their conservative, heteronormative surroundings within which a romance such as theirs is pathologised and punished.

In the film, the pervading sense of isolation within a repressive society is conveyed also through the motif of photography, Todd Haynes's creative addition to the original material. His unique choices in cinematography visually foster the photography of the period: shot in Super 16, *Carol* provides grainy images that resemble 1950s journalistic photographs of Ruth Orkin, Saul Leiter and others, whom Haynes recognises as key aesthetic influences on his film.³ Beyond simply inducing nostalgia, the decidedly antiquated look of the screen serves as a constant reminder of the distance between the characters and the contemporary audience. Photography is additionally incorporated within the narrative, with Therese being presented as a fledgling photographer rather than as a set designer, as in the source novel. Therese's affectionate gaze through the lens as

² Patricia Highsmith, *Carol* (1952; repr., London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 311.

³ Anna Leszkiewicz, 'Behind *Carol*: the photographers who influenced Todd Haynes' award-winning film', *New Statesman*, 27 November 2015 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/art-design/2015/11/behind-carol-photographers-who-influenced-todd-haynes-award-winning-film>> [accessed 10 February 2018].

well as her exchange of looks with Carol speak eloquently of their attraction to each other. The romance of Carol and Therese is so very much restrained by repressive social pressures that the subtlety of their non-verbal cues indicates the protagonists' inability to express their feelings openly. In fact, it is not until after months of enforced separation that Carol finds the courage to say 'I love you' to Therese. Through its decoratively retro-fashioned visual surface and restrained dialogue, the film refuses to provide automatic access to the protagonists' mind, prodding us instead to muster our imagination in order to understand Carol and Therese's suffocating sense of marginalisation within the restrictive society of the McCarthy era.

Another point where Haynes notably departs from Highsmith's novel is in the use of glass reflection. In *The Price of Salt*, Highsmith uses the imagery of glass reflection to foreground Therese's uncertainty about Carol's feelings, rather than their isolation in the society. The novel's use of such imagery is evident when Carol, frustrated about Therese's meekness, chides the younger woman for her partiality for reflected images, asserting that Therese gets 'all [her] experiences second-hand.'⁴ Symbolised by the glass reflection, Therese's emotional blockage keeps her, along with the reader, in suspense about Carol's affection. By contrast, by visually separating the protagonists from their surroundings, Haynes's film constructs a visual schism between society and the protagonists. Carol and Therese are often viewed through the glass windows of cars and buildings, a trope for distancing the characters from their environment and thus creating a sense of their alienation. The mediation by glass windows, along with the grainy cinematography, visually isolates Therese and Carol, both from their surroundings and from the audience. We are therefore led to be concerned less about whether Carol truly cares for Therese than whether the society's homophobic prejudice and oppression will destroy their love.

With its focus thus shifted from the personal to the societal, Haynes's *Carol* can be seen as offering contemporary commentary on currently developing American attitudes toward LGBT people and their rights. Beginning with Massachusetts in 2004, same-sex marriage has been legalised in the majority of the states. Nevertheless, despite wider social recognition and acceptance of such diversity, there remains a residue of homophobia that all too frequently erupts in violent crime. Although the critical acclaim given to *Carol* testifies to the substantial progress the US has made since publication of *The Price of Salt*

⁴ *Carol*, p. 186.

more than half a century ago,⁵ the film serves as a haunting reminder that there is yet much further to go, because the sinister shadow of malice is lurking still.

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⁵ For example, the film received six nominations at the 88th Academy Awards and nine nominations at BAFTA. At Cannes, Rooney Mara won Best Actress.