

Swarthmore College

Works

Film & Media Studies Faculty Works

Winter 2015

Sketchy Lesbians: "Carol" as History and Fantasy

Patricia White

Swarthmore College, pwhite1@swarthmore.edu

[Let us know how access to this work benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-film-media>

 Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Patricia White. (2015). "Sketchy Lesbians: "Carol" as History and Fantasy". *Film Quarterly*. Volume 69, Issue 2. 8-18.

<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-film-media/52>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Swarthmore College Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Film & Media Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

SKETCHY LESBIANS: CAROL AS HISTORY AND FANTASY

Patricia White

Lesbians and Patricia Highsmith fans who savored her 1952 novel *The Price of Salt* over the years may well have had, like me, no clue what the title meant. The book's authorship was also murky, since Highsmith had used the pseudonym Claire Morgan. But these equivocations only made the book's lesbian content more alluring. When published as a pocket-sized paperback in 1952, the novel sold nearly one million copies, according to Highsmith, joining other suggestive titles like *Women in the Shadows* and *We Who Walk Alone* in a postwar lesbian pulp fiction bubble. When reissued by Bloomsbury under the title *Carol* in 1990, the mystery was gone. Highsmith admitted she had written the book. The lesbian clandestine life it recorded belonged to a bygone era.

Now along comes Todd Haynes's atmospheric film adaptation, *Carol*, to revive the *frisson* with twilight images of mid-century lust and anxiety, coded gestures, longing glances, and few, well-chosen words. Written by acclaimed lesbian playwright Phyllis Nagy, who had become friends with Highsmith in the decade before the author's death in 1995, *Carol* shows the price that the eponymous heroine (Cate Blanchett), a wealthy, discontented suburban wife and mother, willingly pays for her taste of salt—a headlong affair with a shopgirl she meets in Bloomingdale's during the Christmas rush. The Haynes-Nagy collaboration also does something trickier: it transports the viewer into the place of the salesclerk, Rooney Mara's Therese Belivet, a protagonist as blank in experience and character as the "I" of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. "Because Therese is Pat's stand-in, she is virtually character-free. Which is fine for a book," Nagy told me in an interview, "but doesn't really work in a movie."¹ What the audience is given instead is Therese's desire with which to identify. Carol is the name of her obsession. So the film's initially disappointingly bland title refers emphatically to both women, to subject and object of desire, gaining in the direct embrace of lesbian desire what it loses in pulpy portent.

Headlining a film with two women is considered box office bravery in an industry that is only now being called out for the lack of opportunity women find both in front of and behind the camera. The film's British producer Liz Karlsen, currently head of Women in Film and Television UK, is outspoken about these inequities. Distributor Harvey Weinstein took on the risk in this case, banking on awards capital to counter any lack of blockbuster appeal. The creators of *Carol* turn this perverse industry logic on its head, making the pairing of two female stars its main attraction. The film uses the allure and potency of contemporary star images to explore lesbian historical agency and to sketch a dream-image of the mid-century movie that might have been.

It is not surprising that Todd Haynes would do a stellar job staging a woman's picture about forbidden love set in 1950s America, after his period dramas *Far from Heaven* (2002) and *Mildred Pierce* (2011). In *Carol*, he directs two commanding and complementary star performances in a swoony but understated style that resonates with, rather than repeats, his earlier work. His attention to detail serves not verisimilitude but rather the *image* of a historical moment, in this case, 1952 before postwar prosperity painted Americans' aspirations in full, garish Technicolor. He is beautifully served by regular cinematographer Ed Lachman's moody lighting and mobile camera, the mint-and-puce palette of Judy Becker's production design, and the sharp characterization brought to the costuming by Sandy Powell—delighted to do a "frock film" after big-budget assignments like Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

The songs by mid-century crooners on the soundtrack, set off by Carter Burwell's score, are as semiotically dense as ever in a Haynes film, from the aching irony of Billie Holliday singing "Easy Living" to the disposition to pleasure (and a specific shade of green) named in "One Mint Julep" by The Clovers. Even in its invocation by name of one of Haynes's most haunting heroines, Carol White in *Safe* (1995), *Carol* fits his oeuvre like a glove. The Cannes premiere—the Weinstein Company held the film, actually completed in fall 2014, for the red carpet display—unfolded like a fairy tale with two princesses, and included a Best

Film Quarterly, Vol. 69, Number 2, pp. 8–18, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630.
© 2015 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please
direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through
the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2015.69.2.8.



Director Todd Haynes on set with Cate Blanchett. Photo by Wilson Webb ©2015 The Weinstein Company. All rights reserved.

Actress prize for Mara and an enchanted press reception that would follow the film through subsequent festival dates.

But it might be surprising that Haynes, as a male director, would be entrusted with the adaptation of *The Price of Salt* in particular. Its lesbian fans wear loyalty to the book as a badge of pride—albeit one tinged with enough shame to make it sexy. Certainly Killer Films, teaming with Karlsen and partner Stephen Woolley’s Number 9 Films to produce *Carol*, has no shortage of lesbian talents: cofounder Christine Vachon launched the directorial careers of Rose Troche and Kim Peirce. In fact, the project came to Haynes after more than a decade in development, and it is hard not to suspect that at least part of the delay was due to its classification as a “woman’s picture” pitched by women.

Lesbian producer Dorothy Berwin optioned the book circa 2000, approached Nagy at the recommendation of their common agent Mel Kenyon, and took an early draft of the script to Troche, who passed. Eventually the rights lapsed, and Nagy thought the project was dead. But Karlsen, who had produced Nagy’s directorial debut, the HBO film on the Scarsdale Diet doctor murder case, *Mrs. Harris* (2005), went

after the rights and acquired them in 2008. Fighting since then alongside Film Four executive Tessa Ross, meeting roadblocks even after Blanchett was attached, Karlsen finally joined forces with Vachon of Killer, her partner on *Mrs. Harris* and Haynes’s own longtime producer.

Following up the Emmy-winning *Mildred Pierce* with *Carol* breaks Haynes’s pattern of alternating heroine-driven melodramas with other projects, but a delay in another film left a gap in his schedule, and he set to work with Nagy on a final script. There is a sense of belatedness about the whole project—a quiet, period lesbian film released just as marriage equality is guaranteed in the United States, and after its Cannes bow, barely trailing the fact-based, intergenerational-lesbian civil rights-themed tear-jerker *Freeheld* (Peter Sollett, 2015), with Ellen Page and Haynes muse Julianne Moore, to the box office and awards-season rituals. But belatedness as a concept informs the film’s historical and aesthetic preoccupations.

Carol foregrounds the role of Haynes’s female collaborators, as his regular producers and performers are joined this time by a screenwriter (a first for this auteur who to date has



Carol's investment in heartbreak honors queer history's losses. Photo by Wilson Webb ©2015 The Weinstein Company. All rights reserved.

directed only his own scripts) adapting a formidable female literary voice. Questions of authorship, authorization, and timeliness are central to what I have termed the question of lesbian representability.² Such an inquiry goes beyond representation—that is, images or outcomes to applaud or deplore, to adopt as points of identification or abjection. While acknowledging the importance of the identity of who makes a queer text, lesbian representability also exceeds the maker's conscious deployment of lesbian images and tropes, turning as well on the moment and mode of reception.

Lesbian representability encompasses social and historical discourses, and the corresponding aesthetic and narrative structures, that make desire between women and its consequences recognizable in both film texts and in the subjects who decode them. *Carol*, with its pre-Stonewall somberness, is a stunning instance of what queer theorist Heather Love has termed “the backward turn” in queer culture—by which she means not a condescending look back from the enlightened

present to document a history that has been superseded, but rather an attention to and affective investment in negativity and heartbreak that honors queer history's losses.³ Haynes makes the turn to the past again and again in his work—he has yet to set a film unambiguously in the present—and often it is a turn to women's situation in the pre-feminist past. The histories of male homosexuality probed in *Poison* (1991), *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), and *Far from Heaven* are also those of waste and spoilage, with no overriding redemptive rhetoric. *Carol* sits at the intersection of these concerns with women and queers, exploring lesbianism's particular relationship to the lessons of lost times.

The reception of *Carol* at Cannes helps distinguish between lesbian representation as content and lesbian representability as form. Reviewers who two years earlier had rhapsodized over the “truth” of the Palme d'Or-winning, sexually explicit *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013) heralded *Carol* as equally authentic, despite the fact that these heroines don't even kiss until ninety minutes into the movie, even though things move quickly thereafter. From my perspective, the critical appropriations were analogous: both were received as lesbian films without lesbians, their characters posed as sexual lure on the one hand and ideal love on the other, equally devoid of referentiality. Discursively lesbianism wavers between hyper-visibility, as in the spectacle of female sexuality times two, and invisibility, as epitomized in Queen Victoria's famous inability to imagine why lesbian sex would be criminalized, given her inability to imagine lesbian sex. In the context of art, both poles can coexist under the mantle of the tasteful.

In the simplest version of *Carol*'s embrace by the cinephile establishment, heterosexual actresses are once again applauded for having sensitively brought forth an aesthetic truth through the genius of the male auteur. Such a response ignores a strongly female creative team including Nagy, Karlsen, and Vachon, and bypasses entirely the film's use of aesthetics to question truth. To be sure, the premiere at Cannes positions the film in a direct line of descent from the art-house lesbianism of European art cinema, which entered postwar American markets at least in part because of the sex. What *Carol* recognizes by referencing this tradition in its mood and design is that the answer to lesbian evanescence is not, or not only, realism of the kind depicted in *Freeheld* (enhanced by Ellen Page's status as a “real” lesbian and its source in Cynthia Wade's 2007 film of the same name that documented an actual case). Instead, *Carol* inscribes lesbianism within a textual and reception history, informed by such dated and delicious tropes as the predatory

lesbian and female homosexuality as a perversion of mother/daughter love.

The film's self-consciousness makes it difficult simply to view the romance between the younger Therese and the object of her desire as a "universal" story in which the lovers' gender hardly matters—as Blanchett has characterized it, commenting that Carol would likely have no use for labels such as lesbian and implying that the film doesn't either. Long ago, Vito Russo called out this ploy in *The Celluloid Closet* with a litany of filmmaker quotations: "'The Children's Hour is not about lesbianism, it's about the power of lies to destroy people's lives.' . . . 'Windows is not about homosexuality, it's about insanity'" and so on.⁴

At the same time, Blanchett is right: *Carol* is designed and effective as a love story *tout court*. Depicting the fugue state of lovers is the challenge Haynes saw in the script and approached in part by consulting Roland Barthes's account of the amorous subject in *A Lover's Discourse* and sharing it with his stars. Barthes entitled his book with an indefinite pronoun—*A lover's discourse*—setting up a play between a singular obsessive "I," with individual erotic quirks, and a position—lover—that the reader can inhabit in turn. In *Carol*, Haynes and his collaborators use point of view, *mise-en-scène*, and other formal elements in order to stage, and to invite the viewer to share in, what remains a specifically lesbian fantasy. It is a love story suspended in time but located in history.

Fantasy functions in the sense of daydream or make-believe and also in the fuller sense explored in psychoanalytically informed feminist film theories, that is, fantasy as unconscious script or "*mise-en-scène* of desire." *Carol's* drifting mood and sketchy plot invite the viewer to find a version of her own most deeply conflicted, desiring self within its constructed world.⁵ The details of setting are more fully realized than those of story. Its characters are ciphers and its dialogue sparse, and the couple's journey through a succession of diners and hotel rooms constitutes a flight without apparent cause or meaningful direction. Even the story's duration is vague, with the action suspended in the calendrical freeze-frame of the Christmas holidays.

As a stylized period film, *Carol* projects a historical space for a lesbian point of view, but not one that takes referentiality as a given and a good. The setting of its fantasy is Greenwich Village in the 1950s, mythical space of dyke bars, butch-femme romance, police raids, and racial mixing; by all accounts, Highsmith was a frequent visitor to those bars. Instead of gratifying the wish to see what lesbian New York was *really* like, however, *Carol* depicts a lover's world, outside of which, Barthes says, everything is "stricken with

unreality."⁶ The film offers "figures of backwardness as allegories of queer historical experience," in Love's formulation of the modernist texts she studies in *Feeling Backward*.⁷ As a "retro" construction from the post-feminist, post-gay present, *Carol* registers the political gains—and losses—that have interceded.

Carol's "women in the shadows" are captured through the careful play of light, color, and composition in Lachman's cinematography, which used the inspiration of Saul Leiter's mid-century photographs to provide a visual vocabulary of city streets blurred by rain, traffic, and shop windows through which Carol and Therese drift in and out of focus. Haynes compiled dozens of images by women photographers including Ruth Orkin, Esther Bubley, Helen Leavitt, and Vivien Maier, as well as ads and magazine spreads, in the film's meticulous preparation. The sketchiness of fantasy finds a material correlate in the film's use of retro Super-16 film stock, which lacks the density of 35mm and the sharpness of digital cinematography. Underscoring this visual aesthetic with the theme of looking through a lens, Therese, who is an aspiring set designer in the book, is changed into a budding photographer for Haynes's film. Carol gives Therese an expensive camera, recognizing in the younger woman's desiring gaze an awakening into subjectivity and point of view.

For all the impeccable period styling one has come to expect in a Haynes film—extending from décor to diction—*Carol* doesn't feel weighed down with "stuff" in the way that *Far from Heaven* and *Mildred Pierce* must be in order to play out the paradoxes of American dreams of prosperity. While it is a little disappointing not to be invited to inhabit the richly hued world of pulp fiction cover art (which Haynes has admittedly conjured already, in the lurid Edward Hopper-meets-Max Beckmann gay bar of *Far from Heaven*), the film offers in its place the pleasure of surfaces themselves—notably the soft leathers and furs of Carol's bourgeois accoutrements: scarves and suitcases, purses and, especially, gloves. Therese acknowledges the power of this tactility when, shown into their room at Chicago's Drake Hotel, she exclaims, "This furniture, this fabric!" The film's proliferation of thresholds and reflections amid the relative emptiness of its locations reinforces what Barthes terms the "extreme solitude" of the lover's discourse. Arguably, this lack of solidity thwarts those who would read the film as a realistic picture of how hard it was to love your own sex "back then" before marriage equality.

Carol opens in a posh hotel restaurant where Carol and Therese are sitting in silence. Choked with emotion, they exchange parting platitudes when a male acquaintance interrupts to offer Therese a lift to a party. The framing device



Carol (Cate Blanchette) first meets Therese (Mara Rooney) at the department store counter in a scene inspired by Highsmith's own experience. Photo by Wilson Webb ©2015 The Weinstein Company. All rights reserved.

is an homage to David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), as is the film's exquisite, lovelorn sensibility. Most of the rest of the film is told in flashback, through Therese's reverie, which reveals how the women met by chance, grew closer, and shared a bittersweet road trip before being forced to part under threat of the loss of Carol's daughter. The end is contained in the beginning. Viewers luxuriate in the sheer impossibility of their romance until, finally catching up to the film's first scene, the full extent of its pathos becomes clear. Only then does the audience learn that Carol has relinquished custody of her daughter Rindy and moved out to live on her own. Nervously, she invites Therese to live with her, but the now-poised young woman declines.

Visually, the temporal shift to the flashback is signaled by Therese's reflection in the rain-streaked window of the car that takes her away from Carol. With Rooney Mara's features blurred, her character resembles the figure on the cover of one of those lesbian pulp novels, yet her character Therese's head is established as the real location in which the film unfolds as well as the blank space at its center. Therese becomes the single subjectivity from which all the story's

characters, emotions, and events emanate, a position akin to the spectator's. For the two hours required to watch the movie, the audience shares the temporality of reverie.

The successful sharing of a markedly blank subjectivity is no mean feat. It requires the film's viewer to be cued by clear stylistic markers ranging from cinematography to performance, and Mara's stillness is very effective. In "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," Freud argues that a writer, in order to disguise the fact that it is ultimately his/her own fantasy that is being enacted, "bribes us by the purely formal—that is, aesthetic—yield of pleasure" in fiction.⁸ The camera movement and blocking, framing and cutting, filmic and visual references with which Haynes's films are plotted, down to the last detail, bribe viewers in precisely this way. After all, Therese is a somewhat improbable magnet for a society housewife's attraction. But understanding her as a stand-in for Highsmith—indulging in an intergenerational fantasy that Nagy sees as more typically male—brings the grandiosity into focus. Haynes's film uses specifically cinematic language to craft the relationship with Therese—an autobiographical one—that Highsmith's book accomplishes in prose.



Carol's (Cate Blanchett) bourgeois accoutrements emphasize the "pleasure of surfaces."

Carol's first shot of a decorative subway grate swoops up with Fassbinder-like showiness as Burwell's score helps lead the audience into the film's gray, mid-century New York. When Therese arrives at her post at the doll counter and turns on the lights, the goods beckon from the screen, like a shop window to the past. Decorated for Christmas with accents of Vincente Minnelli red, the set has a double in miniature: the elaborate model train set that Therese soon sets in motion. An early shot from inside the case enclosing the train introduces the motif of looking through glass, presenting the screen as the threshold to a stylized world.

Within moments the *coup de foudre* strikes, upon which the entire romance will turn; it is love at first sight when Therese looks up from her sales-counter to meet Carol Aird's gaze from across the room. The gaze is, frankly, a lecherous one. Carol, dressed in fur and looking larger than life, fondles her long gloves in one hand and crosses the crowded shop floor to make a transaction. Consulting with Therese, she buys the train as a Christmas gift for her young daughter. "Done," she says—having picked up the gift she came for, and, for all intents and purposes, the shopgirl with it. The conventions of the time, women's exclusion from the culture of cruising, and the pleasures of fantasy—not to mention that only five minutes of the film have passed—require the viewer to wait for this mutual and obviously sexual desire

to be fulfilled. Carol, perhaps deliberately, leaves her gloves behind.

In fact, this moment, this fateful glance, is the kernel of reality around which Highsmith originally constructed her fiction. The writer had taken a seasonal sales job at Bloomingdale's to supplement her income; it was her own lecherous, class-conscious gaze that gave rise to the seduction fantasy that filled out her novel. "Into this chaos of noise and commerce, there walked a blondish woman in a fur coat. She drifted towards the doll counter with a look of uncertainty—should she buy a doll or something else?—and I think she was slapping a pair of gloves absently into one hand."⁹

In a short afterword to the 1990 edition of her novel, published under her own name, Highsmith recounts the swift passage from daydreamer to creative writer. That very evening, she sketched out the story that became *The Price of Salt*: "It flowed from the end of my pen as if from nowhere—beginning, middle, end. It took about two hours, perhaps less." The book's thin plot and careful scene-setting befit its origin in an erotic reverie that lasted precisely the duration of a feature film. Highsmith's creative fever turned out to be the onset of chicken pox, whose symptoms she describes at length, as if making up for the elision of detail in her account of the novel's inception. Embracing the connection between inspiration, disease, and sexuality, Highsmith published the novel,

under a pseudonym to protect the reputation established by her first novel, *Strangers on a Train*, published just two years earlier.

The autobiographical element accounts for the wish-fulfilling aspects of the book. As Freud writes, “the fact that all the women in the novel invariably fall in love with the hero can hardly be looked on as a portrayal of reality, but it is easily understood as a necessary constituent of a day-dream.” So too with Therese’s seduction. If for Freud “His Majesty the Ego [is] the hero alike of every daydream and of every story,” Highsmith’s twisted imagination poses a formidable challenge both to Freud’s binary view of gender and to the idea of happily ever after.¹⁰ Highsmith kept the blondish woman’s address, and eventually she took a train out to New Jersey. After walking up and down the block, she began to fear her behavior would attract unwanted attention on the suburban street. She returned to Manhattan—and, presumably, to her typewriter.¹¹

This is sketchy lesbian behavior. Can one see the trace of the author in the story’s private eye, who tails the women and collects evidence about them? In fact, Highsmith used details about one of her many female lovers, Virginia Catherwood, for her portrayal of Carol. Catherwood was a Philadelphia society lady whose husband had used clandestine recordings as evidence of her lesbianism in a very public custody battle. In the film, the viewer follows the lovers across lonely stretches of highway, from hotel room to hotel room, waiting like the detective for them to “be” lesbians. Their punishment comes swiftly, the morning after they’ve consummated their love, in the form of an ominous telegram informing Carol of the case her husband is making against her. The sense of surveillance pervades the film formally as well: even before the detective is introduced, images are often partially blocked as if viewed by someone in hiding.

The author is clearly visible in aspects of Therese’s characterization. In Freudian terms (the plot begs for it) Therese is the sexually undifferentiated child of the phallic phase who actively desires the mother. Though Therese is no butch, Carol calls her a “strange girl—flung out of space,” marking her gender as alien and non-normative, a characterization enhanced by Mara’s flat, guileless delivery if not her gender presentation. Indeed, Therese’s most distinct quality is not her femininity but her youthfulness. Her costumes are childish: a hooded coat with trim, a tam o’shanter, a beret. In both the novel and the film Therese describes herself to Carol as someone who says “yes” all the time. While she is criticizing her own lack of character, she is also acknowledging the rule of the pleasure principle in her behavior. Significantly, when a waiter asks just what it is she means to order, she responds: “All of it.” She’s willing to pay the price of salt.

The lovers’ exclusivity evicts the daughter, Rindy, from the picture, making room for the female fantasy of being and/or having “something else besides a mother.” In tension with the lover’s “alien” gender, *Carol* mines a rich vein of what Eve Sedgwick terms “gender separatist” lesbian fiction with its conventionally beautiful, feminine couple. Lunching with Carol, Therese wears a white blouse and pinafore that resemble a school uniform, conjuring what Elaine Marks, in her magisterial essay “Lesbian Intertextuality,” recognizes as the primary topos of lesbian literature ever since Sappho: the gynaeceum, or girls’ school.¹² Like Manuela in *Madchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), Therese lacks a mother, while Carol recalls the elegant older women and silky vampires of European art films like *Les Biches* (Claude Chabrol, 1968) and *Daughters of Darkness* (Harry Kümel, 1971), a type Richard Dyer identifies in his classic typology of queers in film, “Seen to be Believed: Some Problems in the Representation of Gay People as Typical.”¹³

Knowing almost nothing about the background of the nearly mute Therese facilitates the audience’s identification with the fiction’s central subjectivity, a device that Tania Modleski points out as common in mass-market romance novels as well.¹⁴ Like these figures, and the prototypical narrator of *Rebecca*, Therese’s seduction fantasy is class-based, racialized, and historically specific. *Carol* is set on the uncertain cusp of the postwar shift to consumer abundance, its primal scene the female paradise of the department store, with Therese serving as both *vendeuse* and goods. In the first hotel room they share, the couple’s intimacy consists of Carol putting makeup and perfume on Therese: the two play cosmetics counter. After the younger woman gets a job in the photo department of the *New York Times*, her femme styling becomes more confident, and her class mobility more plausible. The film pointedly contrasts this style with a visible, and visibly idling, butch-femme couple spotted lurking in a record store. Therese’s transformation highlights how thoroughly Highsmith’s own eroticism was invested in snobbery, wealth, and class privilege.

Therese’s fluctuating gender and class identifications are also consistent with the shifting positions afforded the subject within a fantasy scenario. When Therese arrives at Carol’s suburban manse for the first time, the couple is greeted at the door by both the housekeeper and Rindy. Promptly pressed into serving tea, Therese can easily be scripted into either the role of servant or daughter. She chooses neither. Carol’s husband Harge (Kyle Chandler) looks past the mousy young woman until he turns to demand: “How do you know my wife again?”



Screenwriter Phyllis Nagy imagined Carol as kin to Grace Kelly in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Photo by Wilson Webb ©2015
The Weinstein Company. All rights reserved.

His question jolts the viewer into a recognition of the extent of Carol's domestic transgression. It is Carol's restless desire that marks excess in the film. She appears to Therese, and the spectator, as glamorous, sexy, and mysterious, like Grace Kelly bending in for a kiss in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), in a now-iconic slow-motion point of view shot, intense and slightly threatening. It is Kelly, in fact, in that era-defining film, after whom Nagy says she patterned her version of Carol.

Blanchett plays Carol like a caged lion, pacing and prowling and golden. With her dignified bearing and ability to pass without effort, she is what Robert J. Corber calls a Cold War femme, defined by her dangerous desire.¹⁵ As seen in the first meeting with Therese, she even combines shopping with tricking—a variant of the peculiarly female crime of kleptomania. In a moving civil liberties speech in the lawyer's office, Carol finally rejects the prospect of “living against [her] grain.” There is a certain pleasure in the criminal dimension of her sexuality. The outlaw fantasy is obligingly staged by Harge, who goes to remarkable lengths to have his wife followed.

The curious fact that the couple goes on the run before their “crime” has been committed is consistent with Highsmith's paranoid imagination, and shaped in turn by the realities of McCarthy-era America. Despite Cate Blanchett's teasing comments to *Variety* about her “many” relationships with women (she explains that the initial interview dropped her qualifier—“if you mean sexual relationships, the answer is no”), it is a bit of a stretch to imagine her as a predatory 1950s lesbian—she is so obviously herself. Blanchett *playing* a lusty lesbian, on the other hand, is an important dimension of the film's historical imaginary, a realization of how the larger-than-life female stars of postwar cinema could be experienced as one's own personal seductresses.

Although Therese's subjectivity is focalized in the film's framing narrative, the film is not restricted to her point of view. Camera movement works with the soundtrack to diffuse eroticism and anxiety throughout the film. Scenes from Carol's perspective are included; there's even a late-night confrontation between her drunken husband and her former lover Abby (Sarah Paulson) when the couple is on the run. Another scene shows both parties to a silent phone call—the



The viewer identifies with Therese's desire. Carol is the name of her obsession. Photo by Wilson Webb ©2015 The Weinstein Company. All rights reserved.

importunate Therese and the melancholy Carol—without signaling which is lover and which beloved. The poignance of Carol's desire resonates with Haynes's other films about women's thwarted lives, but her recognition and embrace of it goes further to figure a significant historical rupture. When she beholds Therese's body after undressing her for the first time, Carol gasps: "I never looked like that," remarking more than age difference, signaling the advent of something other, something new.

The Price of Salt has long been held up as an exception to the lesbian-themed novels of the 1950s in which the lovers met with retribution for their deviance. The genre was launched with *Spring Fire* by Vin Packer, a pseudonym of Highsmith's one-time lover Marijane Meaker. By the end of *Spring Fire*, which was published the same year as *The Price of Salt*, one of the heroines is committed to an insane asylum and the other renounces their love. By contrast, in *Carol*, after the flashback catches up with the present, Therese takes charge of the story. Here the film departs, too, from *Brief Encounter*, in which all the heroine has, after renouncing her lover, is her reverie.

While the ending brings Carol and Therese back together, to call it happy may be to sell its complexity short. In the final scene, Therese keeps a rendezvous with Carol, though both women (and the audience) had assumed she wouldn't, implicitly accepting the older woman's invitation to begin a life together. The scene is a model of the film's economic storytelling; the actors' performances are largely internal, while emotion is conveyed by camera movement and sound. Therese searches the crowded restaurant for Carol, spotting her as she dines with smartly dressed friends at a table much like the one where they parted company earlier the same evening. In her first glimpse of Carol, the latter's face is turned to the side. The pose and her yellow hair recall Scottie's first view of Madeleine at Ernie's Restaurant in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958). Therese has been swept into a similar vortex.

The reversal of Therese's earlier refusal of Carol's offer is conveyed formally by an extended point of view sequence as she makes her way across the room without Carol seeing her. The world falls away in slow-motion shots of the restaurant bustle. More mature now, Therese stands erect (like Audrey Hepburn, whom Mara closely resembles, at the end of



Carol plays with stereotypes of the predatory lesbian and the inexperienced schoolgirl.

William Wyler's *The Children's Hour*, 1961) until Carol finally turns slightly away from her conversation partner, as if pulled by the force of Therese's gaze. She meets it not with the tear-stained face that *Brief Encounter's* heroine would have shown had things turned out differently, but with her bright red lips curling into a smile. In the reverse shot, Therese halts, and the camera begins a very slow zoom-out, as if pulling Therese into the ambit of Carol's desire, and the smallest smile appears on Therese's still face. Cut back to Carol with a slowed-down zoom that balances the previous shot and highlights Carol's vulnerability.

This is no homo-normative world of "happily ever after" in which Therese joins the sparkling dinner guests and they discuss the logistics of their move. Instead a hard cut to black leaves the audience hanging on the verge of this second *coup de foudre*, as the music resolves abruptly to emphasize the break.

Following the conventions of Production Code-era Hollywood, a fade guarantees the happily-ever-after while barring the depiction of carnal consumption. In this film's ending, the seductive tilt of Carol's head, a bit like Rita Hayworth's Gilda, brings eroticism to the fore, while the hard sound and image cut leaves the pair physically separated. The lovers remain in their exclusive, eternally present

tense, while the viewer is given both a tantalizing taste of the past and glimpse of a queer future. If Highsmith's own erotic history of serial and sometimes overlapping involvements with women is looked to as a model, there's no guarantee that the couple will sustain their affair. Instead, like the early shot from inside the miniature train village, the ending promises further cycles of desire and loss. *Carol* becomes a retrospective fantasy of a film of the 1950s: if it is not one made in the image of the present, it nonetheless follows a lesbian script.

Notes

1. Phyllis Nagy, interview by author, August 17, 2015.
2. Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
3. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
4. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 126.
5. See Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
6. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 37.

7. Love, *Feeling Backward*, 8.
8. Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), vol. 9, 207–26.
9. Patricia Highsmith, "Afterword," *Carol* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 308.
10. Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," 425–46.
11. Joan Schenkar, *The Talented Miss Highsmith: The Secret Life and Serious Art of Patricia Highsmith* (New York: Macmillan, 2010), 273.
12. Elaine Marks, "Lesbian Intertextuality," *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 181–205.
13. Richard Dyer, "Seen to Be Believed: Some Problems in the Representation of Gay People as Typical," *Studies in Visual Communication* 9.2 (1983): 2–19.
14. Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).
15. Robert J. Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).