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FINAL PAPER: Power Dynamics and the Gaze in *Carol*

A lesbian love story set in the 1950s, Tom Haynes' *Carol*, starring Rooney Mara and Cate Blanchett, is based on the novel The Price of Salt by Patricia Highlands. The Price of Salt was initially released in 1952 under the pseudonym Claire Morgan. Although Highlands would later claim the novel was the most personal thing she had ever written, the staunch homophobia of the time and her recent commercial success for Strangers on a Train stopped her from publishing the book under her own name. It would only be in her late 60s that she acknowledged the novel as hers. The Price of Salt was a critical book, not only because it broached the subject of lesbianism, but because it told a lesbian story with a happy ending – something almost unheard of in a time when all gay literature ended with the protagonists either killed, injured or outcast. The film adaptation of the novel took almost 15 years to be made, although when it finally was it received critical acclaim and box office success. Released in 2015, *Carol* was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or at Cannes and was nominated for six Oscars, though it failed to be nominated for Best Picture or Best Director. Many critics argue that this was due to *Carol* being perceived as "cold" and "detached" given its minimal dialogue and slow editing rhythm. However, upon closer examination it is clear that instead of extensive dialogue, Haynes chooses to convey emotion, connection and character through the movement and cinematography in the film. In particular, he uses cinematography to add depth to Carol and Therese's relationship. Not only does the choice of shots illustrate the immediate intimacy and connection between the two characters but the framing also reveals the shifting power dynamics and emotions in the relationship.

One of the most striking ways Haynes uses non-verbal communication in the film is to reveal the intimacy between Carol and Therese. By setting up similar scenes between Therese

and Carol and Therese and other men (mainly Richard) Haynes is able to contrast his cinematic choices to reveal the women's innate connection. Immediately, from the first scene, even when the viewer is not yet aware of Therese and Carol's intimacy, one is alerted to their connection by the framing of Therese's reactions to both Jack and Carol's hands on her shoulder. When Carol places a hand on Therese's shoulder as she leaves it is a close up shot, which forces the audience's attention onto the way in which Therese gazes at Carol's hand and is clearly emotionally affected by the movement. Additionally, the zoomed in nature of the shot builds intimacy and alludes to the physical closeness Carol and Therese will share later in the film. In contrast, when Jack places a hand on Therese's shoulder when he goes to check on their ride a couple seconds later she does not even turn to look at him. This lack of reaction is further underscored by the fact it is a half shot which makes the viewer feel more removed from the action as the camera is further away.

"Therese and Carol" *Carol* [00:03:30]

"Jack and Therese" *Carol* [00:04:12]

Therese's unique reaction to Carol's touch is also seen when one compares the differences in the scenes portraying Richard and Carol approaching her from behind. The viewer initially sees Richard sitting behind Therese watching a movie in a darkly lit room. While Richard is actively trying to cuddle with Therese and is kissing her neck Therese seems wholly disengaged and pushes him away towards the end of the scene. However, her reaction to Carol coming up behind her, in the hotel could not be more different. In this scene Haynes uses the mirror to show Therese holding Carol's gaze and reaching up to hold her hand. When Carol then kisses her, Therese embraces the intimacy rather than pushing her away like she did with Richard. Furthermore, while both shots only show the heads and shoulders of the characters the framing

of Therese and Carol is much more intimate as they fill the frame and are the dominant features. Richard and Therese however, are positioned at the bottom of the shot, almost as an afterthought – which parallels the different value Therese places on the two relationships.

"Therese and Richard" *Carol* [00:13:38]

"Therese and Carol" *Carol* [01:13:45]

The third way in which the differences between Therese's relationships with Carol and Richard is through their different use of doorways. The end of Richard and Therese's relationship occurs as they are fighting over her upcoming trip with Carol. During this scene, Therese is moving around her apartment packing while Richard is following her. However, at every point in the scene, until right at the end, they are separated by an archway. Quite literally the doorways serve to divide them and illustrate just how far removed they are from each other and the different worlds they exist in. The shots alternate between half and full body further physicalizing the widening space between the couple. This scene is radically different from those between Carol and Therese which rarely feature a doorway or medium separating the two. Usually when depicted inside the car they are both inside or outside so they are not separated. The exception to this is when Carol gets out the car to buy a Christmas tree and in this scene Therese opens the door and stands, effectively eliminating the physical barrier between them. The singular time they are pictured alone on opposite sides of a doorway is when Carol is exiting the shower. The scene immediately follows Therese finding the gun hidden inside Carol's suitcase and so the doorway does represent a small degree of separation. However, Carol's state of undress as well as the way she leans across the doorway in order to grab her sweater from Therese, as well as the comparatively closer shot, shows that the doorway is not representative of a barrier like it is for Therese and Richard, but rather a new threshold they are both about to cross – that of intimacy.




"Richard and Therese Fight" *Carol*

"Carol and Therese" *Carol* [01:05:27]

Finally, in addition to recreating actual scenes to illustrate the differences in Therese's relationships, Haynes echoes the relative closeness of Therese to the character in question through the types of shots he employs. From the very beginning of the film, scenes between Therese and Carol are dominated by extreme close ups that focus on a single body part. This not only makes their physical intimacy more apparent but also enables the viewer to connect with their emotions by highlighting slivers of their faces – particularly their eyes. In comparison, Therese's scenes with Richard as well as with Dannie are dominated by half, ¾, full as well as

wide angle shots – effectively echoing the distance between Therese and these characters through the way they are framed.

"Wide angle and half shots of Therese and Richard" *Carol*

"Extreme close ups of Therese and Carol" *Carol*

Carol and Therese's relationship is also given depth through cinematography as Haynes' uses the camera to mirror and track the shifts in power and emotional dynamics between the women. At the start of the film Carol carries all the power in the relationship. She comes across as the epitome of 50s elegance, a put together and confident matron who is the subject of Therese's infatuation. This is clear from her introduction as the viewer first sees her through Therese's gaze at the department store where she is positioned dead centre in the frame, still while people walk mill around in front of her. The fact that this shot is immediately followed by a tracking shot that slides to focus on an impatient customer asking for a bathroom then back where Carol was standing only builds the magnetism between her and Therese as the viewer is physically aware of her absence in the space.

The first encounters between Carol and Therese solidifies Carol's dominance. "In their early meetings, Carol projects class and authority, all the way down to her drink order (which Therese awkwardly mimics)." (New Yorker, Forbidden Love) This authority is echoed by the physical space she encompasses. While, in the diner, shots of Carol are over the shoulder clean shots and thus Therese is not seen, every time Therese is pictured it is through a dirty over the shoulder in which the back of Carol's head is the same size as Therese's head and shoulders. Furthermore, during their initial encounter in the department store Carol physically dwarfs Therese both when her back is to the camera as well as when she faces it. By having Carol take up more space and be the center of attention, even when not speaking, Haynes highlights her dominance in the relationship and the strong enchantment felt by Therese.

This put-together illusion however, is shattered as soon as Therese visits Carol's home and bears witness to the drama unfolding between Carol and Harges. From this point onwards, as the viewer comes to understand more about Carol's divorce, the power dynamics in the relationship start to shift as the women find themselves on increasingly equal footing. For example, after Therese leave's the Airde's home, Carol calls her distraught on the phone, smoking, with a glass of alcohol nearby. It is the first time we have seen any semblance of disorder from Carol and the close-up shot reinforces her desperation by showing how tightly she is clutching the phone. This moment is especially poignant as it serves as a departure from Carol's earlier demeanor while calling Therese where, pictured in a half shot, Carol is the model domestic housewife, simultaneously calling Therese while cooking dinner.

Additionally, while Carol first arrives at Therese's apartment in a powerful position, as soon as she is reminded of her daughter and the situation at home she is reduced to tears and Therese takes on the dominant role. The framing of this sequence itself gives the viewer insight into this shift of power as initially, as Carol gives her the gift, Therese is bent down kneeling in front of Carol as she opens it thereby physically making herself smaller in comparison to Carol. This is

highlighted by the fact that as the viewer watches Therese through an over the shoulder dirty shot so part of Carol's coat is visible thereby giving a direct impression of scale. In contrast, once Carol starts to grieve she takes a seat on the sofa allowing Therese to appear larger and take on the dominant role as she remains standing.

Interesting to note however, is the fact that the power dynamics do not shift purely because Carol is losing control. Rather, the two women start to reach equal status because Carol grows to rely more on Therese as her feelings for her develop. Thus Therese gains power in the relationship as her emotional pull over Carol increases to the point where she exerts the same force over Carol as Carol does over her. This changing dynamic is seen as even though Carol frequently remains a dominant figure when she and Therese are together, Therese's absence after they part ways has a visceral impact on Carol. Carol's continued dominance is seen in the hotel room on New Years Eve as she is standing over Therese, and hence, is the physically larger individual. Additionally, in the half shot she is drinking beer, a drink that has been associated with men in the film (for example at the bar when Therese first meets Dannie) while Therese sips wine. This subtle aligning of Carol with the masculine role reinforces her position as instigator and dominator at this point in the relationship.

However, this dominance and strength gets challenged later in the film when, after leaving Therese, we see the physical toll the separation is having on Carol. After admitting how difficult it is to come home every day "without [Therese]" Carol must physically be supported by Abby down the stairs. The extreme close up, first of Carol grabbing Abby's wrist with both hands and then clutching on to her for support as they walk underscores the magnitude of the pain and loss felt by Carol. This indirectly illustrates Therese's growing power in the relationship as the viewer is made aware of the fact that, even though they are separated and "over", Carol has strong feelings for Therese that continue to influence her life.

Revealing the extent to which Carol has been affected by the loss of Therese in her life sets the stage for the conclusion of the film in which Therese holds the ultimate power. Though she started the film as a relative ingénue by the final 20 minutes it is clear the fate of the relationship is a decision that will be made entirely by Therese. Carol sets their reunion in motion by asking Therese to dinner, she does so to beg – or as close as Carol can get to begging – Therese to live with her and start a life together. This is communicated through dialogue and Carol's admission of love but more prominently it is done so through the camera's gaze. The first difference between this scene and the rest in the film is the fact that Therese is shown before Carol sitting at the table before Carol. At all other times in the film, when the camera has panned to the two of them sitting together, Carol is the one revealed first. This change highlights the fact that it is Therese who holds the power in the scene as it is Carol who must ask her for forgiveness.

Additionally, when depicting the two women conversing, Haynes ensures both occupy the same amount of space. This presents the two with a new equality in presence not previously seen in the film. Regardless of who's talking the audience sees the character through an over the shoulder dirty shot. Hence, the other character is visibly present at all times. In addition to illustrating the fact that each women holds an equal emotional pull over the other, this also foreshadows the conclusion that both Carol and Therese have reached – they love each other and are going to be an integral part of each others' lives from this point on. This is shown as neither character is viewed in isolation in the scene – rather the viewer is always looking at both.

Ultimately the decision about whether to continue the relationship falls squarely on Therese for it is her choice whether or not to forgive Carol and move in with her. While indecisive and unsure when meeting Carol over tea, in the final scene one sees Therese take control of the situation, decide what she wants and actively pursue it. This is a critical step for the relationship as it presents Therese in a position of unchallenged dominance, but also for her as a character for it symbolizes an important step in maturity – away from someone "who just says yes" and doesn't

know what she wants towards an individual capable of articulating her desires and acting upon them. This is the point at which Therese finally becomes someone with "clarity of vision, [able] to discover who she is and to choose a course of action that expresses that identity" (NY Times Sweet Science) As Therese enters the Oak Room she is a force of energy, striding in to find Carol – undeterred even when she is asked to stop by the Maître Dee. She is pictured alone in a half shot, dominating the frame and exuding confidence. The shot itself is reminiscent of the one with which one is first introduced to Carol in the department store, although this time, instead of Therese being stuck behind a counter but captivated by Carol, she has agency, is the dominant figure and able to act on her desires. Thus, one sees the film come in a circle as Therese and Carol are finally meeting as equal forces in the relationship.

For Todd Haynes the gaze is at the core of film in his mind, "all of our power comes from the act of looking, and what we project onto what we see" (Brilliant Subversiveness). Given this, it's little surprise that so much of *Carol* is told through the positioning of the camera and slow editing. With his cinema graphic choices Haynes invites the audience to stare – to connect with the character. In doing so he builds a relationship and characters with enough depth that they're able to make a happy ending feel shocking rather than like the "unadulterated, Spielbergian, Hollywood exec-satiating vat of schmaltz" (Brilliant Subversiveness) that defines most romantic reunions featured on film. Rather than feel kitsch *Carol*'s ending feels subversive and yet also is a natural progression of both Carol and Therese's journeys as characters. In creating a happy ending that feels authentic, Haynes manages to recreate the Price of Salt in a meaningful way for Price of Salt was one of the first pieces of gay literature that dared to hope and

have a happy ending in a time when gay stories were only deemed “acceptable” if they resulted in the protagonists being killed, injured or unhappy. Though released decades later, *Carol* does the same thing for film. Finally creating a mainstream lesbian movie that ends in a positive space – a sharp contrast to a genre whose narratives continued to echo the melancholy conclusion of the most famous gay film up to that point: *Brokeback Mountain*.