

Carol

(Todd Haynes, USA, 2016)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

- A slow-building love story between two women who defy social convention, capturing the vibrant start of a relationship where every glance or gesture seems loaded with meaning.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- First encounter (00:07:35 - 00:13:19)
- Richard and Therese (00:50:07 - 00:52:24)

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Carol and Therese are regularly shot through doors and windows, often framed so we only see a sliver of them; or their faces are blurred by rainwater on the glass. This adds to the mysterious quality of both women and also reflects what they find so enticing about each other. In one particular shot, it feels like we are peeking into Carol's personal space; her back is to us, adding to her mystery, but we can catch sight of her face without make-up in the mirror, a tantalising glimpse of who she 'really is' behind the glamorous composure of her public persona. Paintings and decor are also used to reflect inner emotions (e.g. the fecund flower painting by the piano in Carol's house that

contrasts with the flat, lifeless floral pattern of the wallpaper). Here, the frame is dominated by a painting of a ship, symbolising the emotional adventure both women are embarking upon.

- Sequence 1: When Therese first spots Carol across the floor, the focus is pulled to give her image clarity and to show Therese's immediate attraction. There is a sharp pan to the left when their lingering look is disrupted, then a CU of the significant gloves slapped on the counter to announce Carol's arrival. Is it to draw Therese's attention to them, too, as a tentative first flirtation? And as a way for Therese to enter Carol's life? The sequence closes with a CU of the gloves left behind on the counter. (This scene is based on a real life experience of the novel's author Patricia Highsmith, who then wrote the book to explore what might have happened next).
- Sequence 2: As Richard and Therese walk along the street, the camera follows them from the rear - we can't see their faces, but their body language is distant and without intimacy. After Richard brings up the plans for Europe, a more obvious physical distance is placed between them. As they continue to walk and talk about love, we can see their faces (especially the honesty on Therese's) but the distance between them remains, signifying the lack of real emotional connection they have.

Mise-en-Scène

- The production design is the opposite of that in the popular TV show *Mad Men*. Haynes said there was a deliberate effort not to glamorize or fetishize the period. The costume and set designers used only fabrics and paint colours that were used at the time. This evokes a world of post-war austerity, where even Carol's glamorous outfits seem a little worn around the edges.
- Sequence 1: The interior of this fairly high-end department store seems murky and stained, even when the lights come on. Carol, when she appears, stands out in her red dress, hat and make-up, but it is lit the same as the rest of

the scene, showing she is still weighed down by the same atmosphere of conservatism. The Santa hats that are given out reflect a conformity that is expected of the staff and, the implication is, wider society. The train set prop could also symbolise how Therese sees her life at this point: predictable but with the stability of staying 'on the rails'.

- Sequence 2: The vinyl record Therese has bought is for Carol (we find later). During this scene, as the disagreement between her and Richard intensifies, she hugs this prop to herself more and more tightly, suggesting her emotional focus is moving to Carol.

Editing

- Structure: The film begins showing the domestic (and working) lives of Carol and Therese separately, and then begins to introduce scenes of them together. By the middle section of the film every scene features (almost) just the two of them, excluding all the other characters. This structure helps us understand the characters as separate entities, and heightens the emotional power when they join together - it also intensifies the wrench of separation when Carol leaves.
- Sequence 1: As the store opens, there is a montage of shoppers, out of which Carol suddenly emerges. There is then a use of shot-reverse-shot to show how Therese's attention is caught, and then to capture the electric moment their eyes meet.
- Sequence 2: The scene begins in a series of long tracking shots with the couple in the frame together. But as they disagree, there is a cut; at the end there is a shot-reverse-shot of both character's faces, each now separated by cuts to show Therese's increased discomfort and sense of separation from Richard.

Sound

- Sequence 1: The rote phrase of the security guard as he hands out the Santa hats and the voice of the tannoy instructing people what to buy, again allude to the conformity of a rigid post-war culture. The conversation between Carol and Therese is ambiguous: framed in a business-like discussion of what present to buy, both women tentatively venture small personal details about themselves, showing their attraction. This sparse, ambivalent dialogue continues through their early meetings, leaving small details (and the performances) to express what their words do not.

- Sequence 2: The dialogue between Richard and Therese is devoid of any intimacy. When Therese tries to ask about gay relationships (the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' are never used in the whole film), his language becomes uncomfortable: "Have I heard of people like that? Sure..." He continues: "There's always some reason for it... in their background." This suggests homosexuality is some kind of character flaw. Richard also abruptly changes the subject when Therese talks about photography; shortly after, when Carol visits, she brings Therese a new camera and rolls of film. This shows a contrast in Richard and Carol's attitude to what is obviously Therese's passion.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- The film represents gay relationships in an overwhelmingly positive way: there is no doubt or guilt exhibited by Carol or Therese about their attraction to each other. Though Carol is challenged by a 'morality clause' as part of her divorce, this legal loophole is portrayed as deeply unfair. Plus, Carol's first response to this disapproval is to escape on vacation with Therese. This gives their relationship the opportunity to blossom, away from their boyfriend/husband. Even when they are caught by the detective, Carol's reaction is one of defiance rather than guilt.
- The women in the film are portrayed as being independent and courageous. Therese has economic independence from the start, and by the conclusion has become a photographer at the New York Times. Carol, after her divorce, also takes up a career and finds an apartment where she can be free to pursue whatever relationship she wishes. Abby, Carol's ex-lover, also lives alone without being dependent on a man.
- The men, by contrast, are the emotionally fragile ones. Both Harge and Richard throw near-tantrums when they begin to suspect Carol and Therese of being in love. One key scene is Harge and Carol's argument after he finds Therese at his home. His question "Exactly how do you know my wife?" drips with suspicion and hurt, and when he physically tries to pressure Carol into joining him in Florida, she pushes him over. Richard's prediction that Therese will beg him to return after she "gets

over” her “crush” seems similarly desperate.

Aesthetics (i.e. the ‘look and feel’ of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- The visual style has a deliberate ‘grain’ from the use of 16mm film. This imitates the photography of the period especially the work of Vivian Maier, a non-professional ‘street photographer’ on whom Therese seems to be modelled - see the documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* (Maloof and Siskel, 2013).
- The colour palette and lighting contrasts with the brighter, almost saturated style used by Haynes in his previous 1950s period piece *Far From Heaven*. That film was a pastiche of the films of Douglas Sirk, where female characters are oppressed by the artificial brightness of ‘white picket fence’ America. *Carol* is less expressionistic and more naturalistic: the colours and lighting in New York seem soiled, muted and dingy. The aim was to create a sense of post-war austerity. The emotions of the characters then illuminate this dinginess - most evidently when Carol and Therese set off on their road trip, the ‘overcast’ atmosphere suddenly dispelled by bright sunshine. According to cinematographer Edward Lachman, it also is authentic to the limited colour range of ‘ektachrome’ film stock that was used in the 1950s.
- The main characters are often shot through glass that is streaked with rain or smudged with dust. This links to the theme of surfaces: both women have a ‘public’ self that they present to the world, with a more vibrant life beneath. The surfaces also represent the impediments between the lovers - both social (disapproval or legal threats) and the personal barriers they have erected to protect themselves. The dialogue continues this theme: during the film’s development, Haynes worked closely with the screenwriter and the main actresses to cut out as much direct speech as possible, to make all their verbal exchanges as clipped and ambiguous as they possibly could. The dialogue becomes a permeable barrier like the glass surfaces: hiding whilst also revealing their true feelings. This makes every glance or gesture loaded with meaning (e.g. the way Carol will touch her neck or hair in Therese’s presence), saying what the characters are afraid of. Shooting through glass and allowing rain or reflections to obscure the subject also recalls the photography of Saul Leiter, another inspiration for the film’s aesthetic.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social

- The film is unusual for a gay love story. Although the lovers face challenges from those around them, they are not portrayed as victims or as people striving for social acceptance; their love is its own validity. When her husband threatens her with a ‘morality clause’, Carol doesn’t attempt to placate him. Instead, she decides to escape with Therese on a road trip. Though Carol later does accept psychotherapy to try to appease Harge (and his parents), in the end she announces that she refuses to “live against her grain”, even if this means losing custody of her daughter. In addition, Therese, though much younger, isn’t portrayed as an innocent seduced by an older woman - she pursues Carol as much as Carol pursues her. As Harge says when he confronts her: “Well, that’s bold!”

Historical

- Many of the taboos and challenges faced by the characters in the 1952 setting are no longer an issue for gay people (in the West). Same sex marriage is legal in many US states, as well as Western Europe, and the concept of same sex couples parenting is also no longer a legal or culturally unacceptable issue. A good example of this would be the gay parents in the US sitcom *Modern Family* (which Barack Obama said was the TV show he most enjoyed to watch with his own family). However, homosexuality is still illegal and punishable in much of Africa, the Middle East, South East Asia and China, and continues to be condemned by many religious groups. That being said, the film was released - amongst some controversy - in Russia where there is a law against “homosexual propaganda” (i.e. any film portraying gay relationships positively). In March 2016, the British Film Institute named *Carol* the Best LGBT Film Of All Time.

Political

- The legal status of gay couples (and their rights as parents) has undergone huge changes since the time of the film’s setting. However, Nagy found that when she approached producers they were put off because there wasn’t the clear political agenda seen in award-winning films like *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008) or *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallé, 2014). Nagy said the point being made by her screenplay was subtextual: that neither Carol

nor Therese fret about their sexuality, it's the surrounding characters that have a problem with it. A good example of this is when Richard, Therese's boyfriend, talking about gay people says that there is "usually something in their background" to 'turn' them gay. Nagy was keen to avoid the 'psychologising' of the main characters' sexuality. She also said that one of the more challenging aspects to getting financing was the fact there are two female leads with male characters in only supporting roles, which suggests that sexism is more of an issue in US film industry than homophobia (see Ideology).

Technological

- Cinematographer, Ed Lachman, decided to shoot on 16mm film as opposed to 32mm or digital. This adds more 'grain' to the images, which creates greater contrast between darker and lighter areas of each shot. This also mimics the photography of the 1950s, which reflects the visual inspirations for the film - the street photography of Vivien Maier and Saul Leitner - and suits the fact most of the film is from Therese's perspective, herself a photojournalist. Some VFX were used to add period detail (or remove contemporary) elements, and to insert filters of rain, dust etc that are symbolically important in the film's aesthetic.

Institutional

- Phyllis Nagy wrote the screenplay 19 years before, and had done many revisions to try to attract producers and financing for what seems like a commercially difficult project. This had led to some compromises and to what Haynes referred to as a 'de-fanging' of the narrative.
- Because Haynes has a reputation for creating popular and critically-acclaimed film from challenging material (from sci-fi/horror film *Poison*, through environmental character drama *Safe*, to another 50s-set melodrama *Far From Heaven*), he was able to get financing from a number of different independent production companies. This enabled him to take risks, especially relying on minutiae - rather than explicit dialogue - to communicate emotions and narrative.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - IDEOLOGY - STARTING POINTS

- *Carol* is notable for its portrayal of a lesbian relationship - and sex - that avoids the 'Male Gaze'. This is a phrase created by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey to explain the sexual objectification of women in cinema (and, by contrast, the empowerment of male characters). "Men act, women appear," is her summation of how gender is represented. The popularity of lesbian pornography amongst male viewers shows that even when men are excluded from the sexual act itself, it is still presented in a way that would please the heterosexual male viewer. The lovers in *Carol* are the centre of the narrative and shot only from each other's perspectives. The male characters are in supporting roles, and we only see the men from the female character's POV. Though Todd Haynes, the director, is male, he is openly gay and he worked closely with screenwriter Phyllis Nagy to create a portrayal of women that avoids the 'Male Gaze'.
- In interviews, Haynes has said that - though he is pleased society in the West has become more tolerant of gay relationships - he feels that the transgressional element of homosexuality has been lost. He has criticised the 'sexless queer' characters featured in many US dramas and sitcoms. Though the move of gay culture into the mainstream has meant it is easier for young people to 'come out', with more positive role models, Haynes has said that he misses the erotic thrill of transgression. The excitement of this taboo element in non-heterosexuality can be detected in his early film *Poison* (1991) and explains why he often explores gay lifestyles in earlier, less tolerant, historical periods such as the 1970s in *The Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and 1950s in *Far From Heaven*.
- *Carol* is also ideologically subversive in its portrayal of motherhood. Carol initially sacrifices her relationship with Therese in the hope she can win custody of Rindy, and is even willing to undergo psychotherapy to 'cure' her of her sexuality. However, in the scene at the lawyer's office she refuses to pathologize or apologise for her desire for Therese. Carol finishes the film willing to give up her rights as a mother to both save emotional pain to her daughter - and, more significantly, so she can be true to herself.