***Carol* (2015)**

**Film background:** *Carol* is a romantic drama directed by Todd Haynes. It received six Academy Award nominations. Todd Haynes is a central figure in the New Queer Cinema movement that emerged in the 1990s, which involved LGBTQ directors making independent films that focused on LGBTQ protagonists who defy social conventions; the films tend to reveal and challenge heteronormativity. Haynes’ films include *Poison* (1991), *Safe* (1995)*, Velvet Goldmine* (1998)*,* and *Far From Heaven* (2002). *Carol* is based on Patricia Highsmith’s 1952 novel, *The Price of Salt.*

**Plot summary:** As *Carol* opens, Carol Aird (Cate Blanchett) and Therese Belivet (Rooney Mara) drink tea in a New York City hotel. They are interrupted by a friend of Therese’s, whom she leaves with. Following this scene, the rest of the film is a flashback to the events leading up to this moment. Therese is dating Richard (Jake Lacy), a co-worker at the department store she works at. One day, during the Christmas season, Carol comes to the store to buy a present for her daughter and meets Therese. The two have a charged encounter, and when Carol accidentally leaves her gloves behind, Therese returns them. Carol calls Therese and invites her to lunch to thank her for the favor. Meanwhile, Carol is separated from her husband, Harge (Kyle Chandler), and they share custody of their daughter. Carol and Therese struggle through the claustrophobia and boredom of their lives, as Carol attends Christmas parties with Harge and Therese socializes with Richard’s friends. The dull nature of their lives is punctuated by their encounters, such as a lunch time meeting and an evening at Carol’s home that upsets Harge. Furthermore, Carol learns that Harge is suing her for full custody of Rindy, based on a “morality” concern due to Carol’s close friendship with her former lover, Abby (Sarah Paulson). Distraught, Carol decides to plan a trip out west, and invites Therese; Therese accepts her invitation, much to Richard’s dismay. The pair travel through the Midwest, at first tentative about their desire for one another. When they reach Waterloo, Iowa, they consummate their relationship, only to discover that Harge has had them followed by a private detective who recorded them having sex through the wall, in order to buttress Harge’s custody claims. Carol leaves Therese and has Abby drive out to bring her home, writing Therese a letter saying that she can’t see her anymore. Therese is heartbroken. However, after some time has passed, she meets Therese for tea at the New York City hotel where the movie opened. There, she asks Therese to come live with her at her apartment. Therese declines. Carol asks her to come meet her at dinner with friends that night, which Therese also declines. However, after Therese goes to a party with her friends and feels the weight of Carol’s absence, she ultimately goes to meet her at dinner, and the two find each other face to face again.

**Content warnings:** *Carol* contains one non-explicit sex scene with partial nudity.

**Running time:** 1:54:34.

**Materials for this week:**

* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts
  + Day 2: Victoria L. Smith, “The Heterotopias of Todd Haynes: Creating Space for Same-Sex Desire in *Carol”*
  + Day 3: Sara Ahmed, “Queer Feelings”

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scenes:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (10-15 min) Student-led scene close-reading and analysis.
3. (7 min) Teacher led close-reading begins. Watch the scene of Therese at work and then Therese and Carol’s meeting. This is a longer scene, but there’s a lot to unpack. It could be shortened to focus on fewer details. (Approximately 6:50-13:29).
4. (8 min) Discussion prep. Students take notes on the questions listed below. Share with a partner prior to whole group discussion if time permits.
   1. How does this scene establish the norms, rules, and expectations of the society Therese lives in?

*This scene establishes that Therese’s job is restrictive and perhaps emblematic of broader social restrictions that surround her. There are many rules Therese must follow. She’s actually reading the employee handbook as she eats before she is ordered to report to the shop floor, and the page she’s on emphasizes the importance of “moral behavior” and good grooming of employees. A person at the door hands employees Christmas hats and repetitively says to everyone, “compliments of the season, from the management,” as if these hats are a gift, but Therese is later reprimanded for not having her hat on, demonstrating that this is a regulation rather than a gift. The first shot of the staff cafeteria is a shot of a sign on the wall that reads, “Keep This Room Orderly.” The sounds throughout the scene also emphasize the store’s ability to control and regulate Therese’s time, appearance, and experience. A monotonous but friendly voice over the loudspeaker speaks in a soothing tone to customers, but a relentless bell at the end of the scene speaks to employees instead – Therese closes her eyes, attempting to drown out the shrill toll of the bell that seems to signal the end of the workday.*

*Additionally, the toys in the toy department remind viewers of the ways that race, class and gender shape culture dramatically, even if they do so in ways that are invisible to the inhabitants of this society. A brief shot shows three puppets next to each other—a stereotypically Mexican male figure, a donkey, and a stereotypically Chinese male figure, demonstrating the dehumanization and erasure of people of color in this place and time period. These toys stand in sharp relief to the baby dolls that surround Therese, which are all white girls. These toys remind viewers that heterosexual white femininity is idealized and carefully regulated, as little girls are called to desire toys that, as the description of Maggie Doll reads, are “attractive with special comb out hair, curlers and hair net included,” or as Therese describes of the sold out Bright Betsy doll, “she cries and wets herself.” These dolls emphasize that from a young age, girls are taught to carefully attend to their appearance and cultivate the skills of motherhood, even from childhood.*

* 1. How does this scene establish the dynamic of Therese’s relationship with her boyfriend, Richard?

*Richard takes Therese to work on the back of his bicycle. This could be viewed as a symbol of him leading her through life; for example, he is speaking with her about his plans to take her to Europe, but she isn’t very responsive to his ideas. She seems to simply coast behind him passively.*

* 1. How does this scene emphasize the significance of Carol and Therese’s meeting?

*Carol seems to shock Therese out of the monotony of her experience. Several details emphasize this. While most of the customers are wearing black, blue, or grey, Carol’s salmon-colored scarf and hat make her immediately stand out in the first shot she appears in.*

*Additionally, Carol turns and pauses as she’s walking away and tells Therese, “I like the hat,” and Therese immediately brightens. Carol must know, from the identical hats worn by all the employees, that this was not a hat Therese selected for herself. Instead, this seems to be an acknowledgment of seeing something about Therese beneath the restrictions that are imposed on her, or seeing that Therese is managing those restrictions well. This moment is emphasized through the cinematography; up until this moment, every shot in this scene was a static shot, but this moment leads to two tracking shots that follow Carol and Therese, indicating that the story has been set in motion by the spark of chemistry between them, and by Therese’s decision to return Carol’s gloves.*

1. (25 min) Whole-class discussion.
   1. How does this scene establish the norms, rules, and expectations of the society Therese lives in?
   2. How does this scene establish the dynamic of Therese’s relationship with her boyfriend, Richard?
   3. How does this scene emphasize the significance of Carol and Therese’s meeting?
   4. **Extension question:** Now that you’ve seen the movie in full, how does this scene set up the themes of this film? What tensions are highlighted through Therese and Carol’s meeting and their surroundings?
   5. **Extension question:** Consider the film’s title. Why do you think it’s called *Carol,* rather than *Carol and Therese?* Do you think this film is more from one character’s point of view or the other?

**Lesson 2: Examining Victoria L. Smith’s “The Heterotopias of Todd Haynes: Creating Space for Same-Sex Desire in Carol”**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection – choose 1:
   1. Did you relate to any of the characters in this film? Explain.
   2. Did you enjoy watching this film? Why or why not?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (3 min) Watch the penultimate scene – Therese at Pete’s party (approximately 1:49:27-1:51:51). This scene is described on p. 25 of Smith’s article.
4. (10 min) Discussion prep. Students take notes on the following questions. If time, share with a partner before whole-class discussion begins:
   1. Review p. 2-3. Smith uses Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” to build her argument throughout this piece. What is a heterotopia? Why is it a useful concept for examining *Carol?*

*Heterotopias are “counterspaces,” which include “cemeteries, brothels, holidays...prisons and American motels” (2). “These counterspaces are bound together because they are all outside of the ordinary, containing a disruption of time and space” (3). According to Foucault, they “have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect” (3). According to Smith, “simply put, heterotopias challenge the order of things” (3). Smith argues that heterotopias are a useful way to analyze Haynes’ depiction of lesbian desire in the 1950s because it provides a way to examine how queer subjects, like Carol and Therese, inhabit, are confined by, and challenge the normative spaces of 1950s culture (3).*

* 1. Review Smith’s comments about the second to last scene, the one we just re-watched (on p. 25 of Smith’s article). Summarize the details that Smith included to demonstrate the significance of spaces in this scene, and connect it to her argument about heterotopias. Then, think about other details in this scene that Smith didn’t mention that you think could add further support to her claim (or challenge this claim and provide an alternate analysis).

*Smith argues that “the framing and color tones here suggest that Therese remains locked in or behind a space where she cannot express her desire” (25). She highlights that “in a series of shots, Therese is once again framed in doorways and through windows, darkly lit and in green tones” (24). This connects to her broader argument about the importance of considering heterotopias because, as Smith argues, “heterotopias function…to disturb sameness, to reflect the inverse of society…they are the place of the other, the deviant” (2). Heterotopias disrupt straight time and space while also potentially existing within that straight time and space. There is further evidence of this in this scene, as we watch with Therese, panning across the party and seeing straight couples dancing together, including her ex-boyfriend. She watches the straight couples together while she leans on the doorframe, standing on the threshold of that space. She somehow senses as Genevieve, (who is also presumably queer, give her flirtatious overtures to Therese) enters the party and watches her from behind, but also from another doorway. Both women are present at this party but do not fully immerse themselves in its spaces and do not fit in with the straight space that is built there. Therese also looks quickly back at Genevieve but cannot maintain her gaze—same-sex desire cannot be seen directly here. Similarly, when they speak to each other, the shot frames them from outside the building, and we see them first through two different windows in the same room, and then through a divided window pane, so they almost appear to be occupying two distinct spaces. They cannot be seen truly connecting as the straight couples dancing or watching TV lying on each other can.*

* 1. Choose one example of a scene that Smith does not address (or details she doesn’t provide about a scene she does describe) that illustrates how Haynes uses Foucault’s concept of heterotopia and what that heterotopic moment shows about Carol and Therese’s world.

*Answers may vary. If there is time, it might be interesting to review the scene in which Therese reads the letter Carol has left for her (Approx. 1:27:30:-1:29:45). In the singular moment of true emotional devastation we see from Therese, she gets out of Abby’s car and vomits in an open field. It is a very different setting than the cramped motel rooms, apartment doorways, and cars we see her in throughout the rest of the film, and this appears to occur at twilight, echoing Smith’s comments on “odd girls and twilight lovers” (2). In contrast to the restrictive spaces that Therese primarily occupies, this is a singular moment of emotional expression that is possible for her. This highlights the importance of considering space and constraints as a way to examine the suffocation of homophobia and silence that pervades the settings she typically encounters.*

1. Whole class discussion.
   1. Review p. 2-3. Smith uses Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” to build her argument throughout this piece. What is a heterotopia? Why is it a useful concept for examining *Carol?*
      1. Additional questions if necessary: Review the top of p. 3. Why is a cemetery an example of a heterotopia? How does that help us understand this concept?
      2. What sentences on 2-3 did you find helpful? What sentences did you find confusing?
   2. Review Smith’s comments about the second to last scene, the one we just re-watched (on p. 25 of Smith’s article). Summarize the details that Smith included to demonstrate the significance of spaces in this scene, and connect it to her argument about heterotopias. Then, think about other details in this scene that Smith didn’t mention that you think could add further support to her claim (or challenge this claim and provide an alternate analysis).
      1. Consider the shot in which Therese watches the couples at the party dancing, just as Genevieve arrives. How does that shot support Smith’s argument?
      2. Consider the scene of Therese and Genevieve speaking in the kitchen. How does that shot support Smith’s argument?
   3. Choose one example of a scene that Smith does not address (or details she doesn’t provide about a scene she does describe) that illustrates how Haynes uses Foucault’s concept of heterotopia and what that heterotopic moment shows about Carol and Therese’s world.
   4. **Extension question:** What questions do you have about Smith’s claim?
   5. **Extension question:**How might we extend Smith’s analysis of heterotopias to other films we have studied?

**Lesson 3: Applying Sara Ahmed’s “Queer Feelings” to *Carol***

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast reflection – Compare *Carol* to another film we’ve seen so far in this course. What do the two films you’re considering have in common? What makes this one different?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (15 min) Study Groups: In small groups, students will review the excerpt from Sara Ahmed’s essay, “Queer Feelings.” You may want to provide a worksheet for students to take notes on the following questions.
   1. Ahmed explains, “The family is idealizable through the narrative of threat and insecurity; the family is presented as vulnerable, and as needing to be defended against others who violate the conditions of its reproduction…..What needs closer examination is how heterosexuality becomes a kind of script that binds the familial with the global: the coupling of man and woman becomes a kind of birthing, a giving birth not only to new life, but to ways of living that are already recognizable as forms of civilization” (423). Explain this passage – what does she argue about the family and society?

*In society, the family is presented as a vulnerable structure that needs protection from external threats, such as queer people and immigrants, who threaten the repetition and reproduction of structures that are familiar as “the norm.” This is why homophobia is often presented in terms of threats to “the family.” This is important because the family is often viewed as a core structure that makes up “civilization” or society, so threats to the family are understood as threats to “life as we know it” or civilization as it is understood by those who fit the norm.*

* 1. Review p. 423, and define “compulsory heterosexuality.” What does Ahmed mean by this?

*Ahmed emphasizes that compulsory heterosexuality involves society’s encouragement of the repetition of practices that fit the norm, and society’s discouragement of practices that deviate from the norm. These repeated scripts or tasks become invisible because of their repetition – we don’t see the labor involved in living up to these norms. Ahmed focuses on the way the culture of compulsory heterosexuality is a physical experience that shapes bodies and lives. She highlights that compulsory heterosexuality “shapes bodies by the assumption that a body ‘must’ orient itself towards some objects and not others” (423). She also points out that it is possible to rebel against this system, but there are consequences to that rebellion: “One does not have to do what one is compelled to do: for something to be compulsory shows that it is not necessary. But to refuse to be compelled by the narratives of ideal heterosexuality in one’s orientation to others is still to be affected by those narratives: they work to script one’s orientation as a form of disobedience The effects of not following the scripts can be multiple” (423).*

* 1. Review p. 425, and explain Ahmed’s metaphor of “sinking into a comfortable chair.” How does this metaphor relate to heteronormativity?

*Ahmed uses this metaphor to highlight that comfort is often something that goes unnoticed, whereas discomfort is experienced as physical. In explaining the comfort of fitting into normativity, Ahmed explains, “It is, after all, pain or discomfort that return one’s attention to the surfaces of the body as body. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins…in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies” (425). Similarly, heteronormativity creates a space of comfort for those who fit the norms, and heterosexuals may not even notice the comfort they are afforded by these structures. Queer subjects may notice the ways they don’t “fit” in the culture of the norm.*

* 1. On p. 428, Ahmed asks, “So the closer that queer subjects get to the spaces defined by heteronormativity the more potential there is for a reworking of the heteronormative, partly as the proximity ‘shows’ how the spaces extend some bodies rather than others…when does this potential for ‘queering’ get translated into a transformation of the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality?” (428). Review 428-430. Explain this passage and support your response with additional evidence.

*In this passage, Ahmed explains the productive potential of queer discomfort in heteronormative space. She highlights that queer discomfort can make visible the elements of heteronormativity that are often made invisible through repetition of norms and adherence to compulsory heterosexuality. In writing about discomfort, she explains that it is “a discomfort which is generative, rather than simply constraining or negative….this ‘affect is also a sign of what queer can do, of how it can work by working on the heteronormative…Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where that discomfort might take us” (430).*

* 1. What components of Ahmed’s piece remind you of *Carol,* and why? How does Haynes’ film illustrate Ahmed’s claims?

*Threats to the norm:*

* *“”The family is idealizable through the narrative of thread and insecurity; the family is presented as vulnerable, and as needing to be defended against others who violate the conditions of its reproduction” (Ahmed 423)*
  + *Harge, his parents and his lawyer present Carol’s lesbian relationships as a threat to the structure of the heterosexual family and call into question her ability to be a mother*
* *“The failure to orient oneself ‘towards’ the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world, an affect that is readable as the failure to reproduce, and as a threat to the social ordering of life itself” (Ahmed 423)*
  + *Carol’s relationships are a “threat to the social order” and are therefore grounds for her medicalization (therapy) and removal of parental rights*
* *“The ‘heterosexualisation’ of public spaces such as streets is naturalized by the repetition of different forms of heterosexual conduct (images on billboard, music played, displays of heterosexual intimacy, and so on), a process which goes unnoticed by heterosexual subjects” (Ahmed 425)*
  + *One can read the Christmas party scene where Carol dances with Harge as an illustration of this; she blends into the crowd of dancing couples because they are “repeating” the script of heterosexuality even though it doesn’t fit her experience*

*Queer Discomfort and Its Potential:*

* *“Queer subjects, when faced by the ‘comforts’ of heterosexuality, may feel uncomfortable (the body does not sink into a space that has already taken its shape)…Discomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one’s body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled…” (Ahmed 425)*
  + *Carol doesn’t seem to feel comfortable in this Christmas party, and looks out of place and frozen*
* *“It is, after all, the bonds between queers that ‘stop’ queer bodies from feeling comfortable in spaces that extend the form of the heterosexual couple. We can posit the effects of ‘not fitting’ as a form of queer discomfort, but a discomfort which is generative, rather than simply constraining or negative. To feel uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives…Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us” (Ahmed 430)* 
  + *There are many moments where Carol and Therese cannot feel comfortable, when they seem to invisible and illegible as a couple, such as when speaking to the hostess to get seated for dinner at the Drake, or when they are having breakfast at the motel on their first day of the trip. These moments sometimes suggest “excitement” in the face of uncertainty, such as when Carol winks at Therese before they are seated for dinner, conscious of the fact that the truth of their relationship is invisible.*
  + *Additionally, the film’s closing scene suggests that Carol and Therese are attempting to forge their own lives in the midst of heteronormative public space. Rather than end with a scene of Carol and Therese in the privacy of Carol’s apartment (like their furtive motel experiences), the film ends immediately before Carol presumably introduces Therese to those seated around her. The film draws attention to the public nature of this meeting – Therese walks in slow motion to Carol’s table, passing many people and surveilling the crowd around her. She pauses before approaching the table, perhaps uncertain of what might happen next or how she would be introduced. Carol smiles, apparently ready to bring Therese into the group, no matter the discomfort it entails. (Even the table looks small – the group may be physically uncomfortable as Therese joins them.) This suggests their potential to “work on the heteronormative” in the future, embracing this discomfort and challenging the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality that pervade public space.*

1. (7 min) Scene screenings – Watch two short scenes and take notes on how they may be relevant to Ahmed’s argument. (Carol and Harge dance at the Christmas party, approx.. 24:30-25:40 and Therese goes to the Oak Room to meet Carol, approx. 1:52:15-1:54:32). Students jot down notes on these scenes and discuss with a partner.
2. (26 min) Whole class discussion:
3. Ahmed explains, “The family is idealizable through the narrative of threat and insecurity; the family is presented as vulnerable, and as needing to be defended against others who violate the conditions of its reproduction…..What needs closer examination is how heterosexuality becomes a kind of script that binds the familial with the global: the coupling of man and woman becomes a kind of birthing, a giving birth not only to new life, but to ways of living that are already recognizable as forms of civilization” (423). Explain this passage – what does she argue about the family and society?
4. Review p. 423, and define “compulsory heterosexuality.” What does Ahmed mean by this?
5. Review p. 425, and explain Ahmed’s metaphor of “sinking into a comfortable chair.” How does this metaphor relate to heteronormativity?
6. On p. 428, Ahmed asks, “So the closer that queer subjects get to the spaces defined by heteronormativity the more potential there is for a reworking of the heteronormative, partly as the proximity ‘shows’ how the spaces extend some bodies rather than others…when does this potential for ‘queering’ get translated into a transformation of the scripts of compulsory heterosexuality?” (428). Review 428-430. Explain this passage and support your response with additional evidence.
7. What components of Ahmed’s piece remind you of *Carol,* and why? How does Haynes’ film illustrate Ahmed’s claims? Refer to the two scenes we just watched or other scenes you think are relevant.
   * 1. Consider the Christmas party scene. How did Carol appear when she was in the car with Abby, compared to how she seemed at the party? Why does Haynes emphasize this difference? How does this speak to Ahmed’s claims about comfort and discomfort?
     2. Consider the final scene of the film. Why did Haynes stage Carol and Therese’s reunion in the Oak Room, as opposed to Carol’s apartment, for example? How does this relate to Ahmed’s argument about the potential of queer discomfort?
     3. How do the editing and cinematography highlight the significance of this space?
     4. What do you think might happen when Thesese approaches the table? How do you think Carol’s friends will respond?
8. **Extension question:** Do you agree with Ahmed that “queer discomfort [can be] generative, rather than simply constraining or negative?” (430) Why or why not?