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Far From Toy Trains

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"Far From Toy Trains"

Walter Metz

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While relating his moving love story of Therese (Rooney Mara) and Carol (Cate Blanchett), Todd Haynes' new film forwards a remarkable understanding of film history. In the film's opening image, over which the credits are presented, the camera lingers on an intricate pattern of metal strands. While the structure turns out to be a drainage grate in the gutter of a city street, the pattern invokes *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), whose opening image features a chain-link fence constructed from a similarly repeating metallic pattern, one which traps Charles Foster Kane in his failed pleasure-dome, Xanadu. *Citizen Kane* is the greatest bildungsroman of the cinema, tracking the rise of a young boy born poor in a shack into a newspaper mogul modeled on William Randolph Hearst.

Welles' modernism is devoted to gloating over the fall of the powerful man. Indeed, modernism is obsessed with this negativist project, lamenting the devastation modernity wreaks on its hapless human victims. *Carol* engages such modernism only to overwrite it with a loving embrace of melodrama. Further into the film's opening scene, the camera approaches Therese from behind, framing only the back of her head. This invokes another of Haynes' favorite filmmakers, Jean Luc-Godard, whose *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) begins in a diner and rests for minutes only on the backs of the quarreling lovers' heads. Whereas Godard uses the alternative style to ironize the cinema's typical embrace of romance, Haynes redeems the gesture. His immediately subsequent frontal close-ups on Therese's face refuse to disdain the possibility of cinematic love.

Carol is a bildungsroman of an entirely different order. When we first meet young Therese, she is standing at the counter of a downtown department store, surrounded by toys, particularly dolls and trains. In the case of both objects, Haynes invokes film history in order to forward his story of Therese's productive coming of age. The toy trains beloved by the child-like young woman are best represented in Charles and Ray Eames' film, *Toccata for Toy Trains* (1957), a celebration of the craft of sculpting wood and metal into objects that keep adults connected to the joys of childhood. Similarly, the dolls which litter the department store shelves, and hence the film's frames, invoke Haynes' infamous first film, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1988) in which he tells the story of the 1970s singer's death from anorexia nervosa by gradually melting Barbie dolls and filming them. Whereas *Superstar* laments the social destruction of a

talented woman, *Carol* celebrates her development into a mature, caring human being.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0040.303-00000001.jpg\]](#)

Figure 1. Carol meets Therese in the department store at the beginning of Todd Haynes' *Carol* (2015)

This conceit is most effectively carried through in Haynes' loving reconstruction of *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), a sumptuous classical Hollywood melodrama also of central importance to Haynes' earlier paean to the 1950s, *Far From Heaven* (2002). Near the end of Sirk's film, Cary (Jane Wyman), alone and abandoned by her adult children, shops for a Christmas tree at a stand on the town square. She runs into Ron (Rock Hudson), who is helping his friend unload the trees from his farm. Cary and Ron have a touching encounter until a young blonde shows up. Cary misreads their relationship, thinking Ron has taken up with the young girl far too soon after their break-up.

Haynes re-works Sirk's Christmas tree scene, placing it much earlier in the film. As they are first falling in love, Carol drives Therese out of the city to her home in the country. Carol stops at the roadside stand and exits the car to purchase a tree for her family while Therese remains in the car. A photographer, Therese takes out her camera and snaps a shot of Carol with the tree. While the scene does not build the emotional tension it has in Sirk's film, it introduces Haynes' intervention into the material. While simultaneously taking on the function of Ron, as Carol's younger lover, Therese also adopts the stance of Sirk himself. Therese films the scene of Carol at the tree stand, as Sirk did Cary at hers.

This introduction of the artist into the diegesis allows Haynes' film to chart a completely different course. *All That Heaven Allows* ends with love held in stasis. Within the "too-late" logic of the melodrama, Ron lies convalescing in bed, having fallen off of a cliff waving to Cary. Cary ends the film dutifully sitting vigil by his side. Whether they will be happy again, and how they will deal with the brutal social regime that surrounds them,

are dogging questions that the film leaves unanswered as it ends in limbo.

Haynes leaves no such ambiguity about the power of love. Carol initially gives up her relationship with Therese in an effort to prevent her husband from taking her daughter, Rindy away from her. However, Carol eventually realizes the futility of sacrificing happiness for social convention. In her lawyer's office, Carol abandons her custody bid, channeling the famous ending of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House* (1879). Nora tells her husband, Torvald that she is abandoning him and their children so that she may find out what she could become in the world outside. The play ends with her slamming the door in Torvald's face. There is no such need for Carol to slam the door in the lawyer's office; she simply states, “What use am I to [Rindy] if I'm living against my own grain?” Unlike even Ron and Cary, Carol and Therese are not too late to find happiness and stability, despite their 1950s milieu.

It is art that engineers this transformation. Therese captures Carol in various photographs, the most important of which is the one at the Christmas tree stand. The film returns to this image repeatedly. What Ron and Cary were not able to do, and Sirk was unwilling to allow to happen, the artist Therese, in control of her own story, can. When Carol writes Therese a letter apologizing for her retreat into conventionality, Therese has the ability to take action and return to her beloved. No slippery cliffs or German filmmakers can delay this journey into adult happiness.

The function of the filmmaker in *Carol* is quite different than in Sirk's film. Haynes inserts himself, not as omnipotent god controlling his characters, but instead as a helpmate. Dannie McElroy (John Magaro) woos Therese briefly at the beginning of the film. When he learns she's a photographer, he helps her get a job at his workplace, *The New York Times*. This is the productive bildungsroman structure of *Carol*. At the beginning of the film, Therese is trapped at the department store not by the toys that activate her imagination, but instead by dour 1950s conformity. Her dowdy female boss scowls at her for taking a phone call. When Carol asks Therese to show her the trains set up all over the department store, Therese responds allegorically, observing that she cannot leave her station: “I'm sort of stuck behind this counter.”

Haynes-as-Dannie's intervention allows Therese to grow beyond her infantilized role at the department store, forced to wear a silly Santa hat while selling toys. He initially takes an interest in Therese for romantic reasons; Dannie tries to kiss her early in the film, only to be rebuffed. However, this rejection does not keep him from continuing to offer her a job at the newspaper, an opportunity she finally accepts. We first meet Dannie in the projection booth at a movie theatre where Therese and her friends are watching *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), another modernist film pessimistic about love. Danny is taking notes—“I'm tracking the correlation between what the characters say and what they feel”—gleefully embracing the critic's role. Haynes' film focuses our ability—critics and filmmakers alike—to celebrate the human ability to overcome social repression and find the relationships that make the world bearable. In *Carol*, Haynes has produced a masterpiece of the melodramatic imagination.

Author Biography:

A long-time member of the editorial board, Walter Metz is the editor of the new monthly film and television reviews feature of *Film Criticism*. He is a professor in the Department of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

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