

Sample Research Essay

Carol: A Present Day Addition to New Queer Cinema of the Nineties

For many, the movie theater is a place to enjoy a light-hearted Friday night with popcorn, soda and candy. But with 71% of people in the United States and Canada going to the cinema at least once in 2016 (MPAA), the theater offers a place to deliver a message to a large, diverse, audience. The New Queer Cinema Movement, a term that came to describe the influx of movies on the topic of the LGBT community during the 1990's, is a prime example of taking advantage of the large attendance of films in order to bring an opinion to a wider audience. Coined by film scholar Ruby B. Rich, the term "New Queer Cinema" has specifically been used to categorize movies that all share common characteristics related to bringing queer issues and ideas to the public. In 2015, director Todd Haynes, one of the main directors of the New Queer Cinema Movement through his releases like *Poison* and *Safe*, released the film *Carol*. Based off of the novel *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith (Originally published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan), the story follows the difficulties of lesbian love in the 1950s. Though released long after the prime of the movement and set in the 1950's, *Carol* is a film that belongs to the New Queer Cinema Movement because of the way it puts the spotlight on issues in the LGBT community and preaches the importance of comfort in one's sexuality, which are characteristics of movies originally attributed to the movement. Though issues of homophobia are not life-or-death like those of the films in the New Queer Cinema in the 90's, the issues addressed are prevalent in the community and in return are important to talk about.

Todd Haynes, a director famous for his influence in the New Queer Cinema Movement, was able to use experiences and characteristics from his old films to make *Carol* fit right into the

genre of New Queer Cinema. Though Haynes has not specifically tried to come off as a gay director making only gay films, he is often seen as the epitome of a director from the New Queer Cinema Movement (Levy 163). His 1991 work *Poison*, a movie that confronts the issues of AIDS and homosexual obsession, is a centerpiece of New Queer Cinema. *Poison* is related to the New Queer Cinema Movement through societal perceptions that homosexuality is “an unnatural force” (Levy 172). A leprosy victim who is coined as the “Leper Sex Killer” has obvious relations to the public perception of the AIDS epidemic in the 1990’s (Levy 170). This matches the New Queer Cinema Movement’s focal characteristic of confronting current issues in the LGBT community. Another one of Haynes’ films that links him to the New Queer Cinema Movement is *Safe*. *Safe*, a film released in 1995 about a housewife who becomes sick with an environmental illness, further attaches Haynes to the movement due to the main character Carol being set “up as a victim of ... a repressive, male dominated society” and by the film’s critique of the idea of blaming the victim for the disease they contracted (Levy 179). This relates to big issues during the nineties involving the blame culture of AIDS victims and people whose lives were suppressed because of the realities of conforming to the male dominated society. Directors’ films all seem to have characteristics that relate each one to the others; therefore, *Carol* is affected by the New Queer Cinema status of Haynes’ previous films. During an interview about *Carol*, Haynes himself admits how many of his films capture the theme of non-conformance:

Q: Did that draw you to it? I feel like that’s a common theme in your films, that theme of conformity?

Haynes: ... Like in the novel, Therese is an aspiring stage designer, and that immediately puts her just a little closer to Bohemia and Greenwich Village life in the early 1950s, a place where you might imagine she would encounter different life choices and people rejecting different notions of femininity or the grey flannel suit for the traditional man. Just different sort of clothes, classes and identities that allowed themselves to be played out

and were not filtered. And I feel like we've sort of seen that depicted in films, and I kind of like showing people who have less exposure to alternative ways of being or identifying. (IndieWire)

Because of the continuous influence that Haynes' previous films have on *Carol*, there is no doubt that *Carol* could be grouped in the same genre as them. In return, it is reasonable to conclude that *Carol* can be considered a major part of the New Queer Cinema Movement because of its similarity to other films of the movement that impacted it.

Carol's ability to take the idea of circumlocution around homosexuality and ironically put it in the spotlight of cinema to address homophobia fits the film directly in as a New Queer Cinema Movement film. Throughout the film, the heterosexual characters seem uncomfortable to even mention the idea of being homosexual. As Carol approaches her lawyer about an injunction, he dances around the idea that Carol is homosexual. The lawyer first tries to delay talking about the reason why Harge (Carol's soon to be ex-husband) changed the custody agreement. After more delays, when Carol finally digs deeper in what the lawyer actually means, he says that he "won't mince words" with her and simply states "Abby Gerhart". Even after he proclaims that he is telling her directly what is happening, all he manages to say is the name of Carol's ex-lover. He then states that Harge is "suggesting similar associations with...well they are suggesting a pattern of behavior"(Carol 46:45). The idea that the lawyer is prancing around the situation that Carol has had a lesbian affair is ironic in terms of the New Queer Cinema Movement because the movement itself is about confronting homosexuality. This mirrors an idea Sarah Ahmed presents in her essay "Feminist Killjoys" about female conformity. Ahmed says that recognizing things for what they actually are instead of what society fully recognizes may bring discomfort to some, but it is important in people reaching their full potential (Ahmed 75). The characters obviously trying to avoid the topic ironically brings the importance of recognizing homosexuality to the

film. The inclusion of this scene in the film can be seen as a strong influence from the New Queer Cinema Movement because it is not present in *The Price of Salt*. Harge also avoids confronting and acknowledging Carol's sexuality when Carol tells him that she will not come with them for Christmas. When Carol says she has Abby to keep her company, Harge says, "There is always Abby" (Carol 29:55), alluding to Carol's past lesbian affair with Abby. Instead of communicating with Carol directly on the relationship, he purposefully avoids the topic. By having the heterosexual characters purposefully sidestep homosexual conversation, *Carol* sheds light on the importance of accepting the idea of homosexuality. The refusal of recognition shown in the previously mentioned scenes is a large part of homophobia. In fact, turning away from acknowledging homosexuality can be interpreted as the result of the implicit tendencies of homophobia. Though homophobia in the extreme ways of the victim shaming of the AIDS crisis is not as common today, it is still extremely prevalent in a reserved way. Someone avoiding the discussion of homosexuality can easily tell themselves, "I've never said I was against homosexuality" while continuing to act inherently homophobic. By making the circumlocution around homosexuality undeniably apparent, the film fits into the activist-driven motive of the New Queer Cinema Movement in its attempt to bring homosexuality into conversation to combat homophobia.

In the film *Carol*, the idea of finding comfort in one's sexuality (a characteristic immediately evident in evaluating New Queer Cinema films) can be seen quite explicitly through the implicit social cues of the characters. During the first lunch scene between Carol and Therese, the audience is immediately keyed into Therese's normal indecisiveness. When she is asked what she will order for lunch after Carol orders, she clumsily tells the waiter that she will "have the same". Her inability to make a decision is even stated by Therese herself when she is

asked whether or not she wants to live with Richard. When evaluating this situation under the Queer Cinema Lens, these moments of hesitancy can be seen as parallel to the uncertainty of her sexuality. Therese can never make a decision in her life because she is yet to make a decision on her sexual character. Carol on the other hand is extremely confident during her “date” with Therese. She immediately orders as soon as she is handed the menu and easily states that she wouldn’t have invited Therese out to lunch if she was a man. Contrasting Therese’s indecisiveness, Carol is continuously straightforward and seemingly at ease during the duration of the lunch. But in the next scene when she goes out to a party with her soon to be ex-husband, she is extremely nervous and uneasy. She tries to get Abby to go in with her and begins to breathe heavily. Following the same analysis, the movie seems to be making a point that events that cause us to stray from our sexual orientation make us uncomfortable. Though a lot has changed since the original and main New Queer Cinema Movement films were released, the issue of people having to be reluctant to admit to themselves their actual sexuality has yet to be resolved. With pressure from the still partially homophobic society to conform to the “typical” sexualities, straying away from heterosexuality is not the easiest thing. But by resisting the truth of sexuality, one will find themselves overwhelmingly uncomfortable. This film speaks to this issue in a way that aligns itself with New Queer Cinema films.

Complementing the implicit nature of the personal significance of someone completely understanding their own sexuality, the firsthand importance is also displayed in the state of eye contact between characters. Throughout much of the first lunch conversation with Carol, Therese’s eyes are shifting between Carol, the table, and off to the other customers of the restaurant. This differs from the conclusion of the film when Therese comes back to Carol at dinner to tell her that she wants to live with her. During the whole slow motion scene, Therese’s

eyes are constantly focused on Carol. This enduring focus, in contrast with Therese's previously shifty eyes, tells us of Therese's new found confidence now that she is comfortable with who she is. This ending, though different than many of the New Queer Cinema Movement at first glance, helps the film follow the movement's underlying motive. In contrast to the old New Queer Cinema films trying to spark conversation about the horrific condition of being homosexual at the time, the warm happy ending in *Carol* with Therese finally finding comfort in her sexuality conveys the actual comforting reality of realizing your true sexuality. This warmer ending also allows the film to have a larger following by appealing to critical reception in today's award driven cinema environment. By allowing the message to reach more people by shaping the movie to be well received, this film can impact more everyday people, inspired by the motivation of the New Queer Cinema Movement to create change for the LGBT community.

Though the New Queer Cinema Movement originally revolved around the topics concerning the LGBT community of the 1990s, there is no reason why the movement could not continue today. The fight for LGBT rights is nowhere near over, with same-sex marriage not even being legalized in the United States until 2015 (the same year as the release of *Carol*). The New Queer Cinema Movement is all about adding to the conversation on the topic of LGBT rights and conditions (Rich xxiv - xxx), and while there is still more to add to the conversation, the movement lives on. *Carol* also follows the New Queer Cinema movement by providing revolutionary content from a cinema perspective. The book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* by Heather Love recalls the 1995 documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, which points to the fact that lesbians character are often portrayed as ashamed of discovering they are lesbian. The documentary mentions the film *The Children's Hour* where when one woman admits her love for another character, she exclaims "I feel so damned sick and dirty, I

can't stand it." (Love 15). In contrast to the negative emotions previously attributed to being lesbian in films, *Carol* offers a surprisingly new story in the film world, a sort of contemporary touch that connects it to other films in the New Queer Cinema Movement. From this, the other similarities to New Queer Cinema Movement films and the attention *Carol* puts on issues in the LGBT community that are significant today, the film can be considered a current addition to the New Queer Cinema Movement. While issues in the LGBT community today have different stakes with less grave consequences, that in no way makes them unworthy of being addressed by films; the New Queer Cinema movement is all about making a positive impact on the issues that are present.

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