

'I just take everything and I don't know anything'

Carol
Todd Haynes
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REY CONQUER

At the beginning of *Carol* (2015), three young people are watching *Sunset Boulevard* from the projection booth, jostling to see through the porthole. "Right now," says the younger of the men, with smug, earnest pride, "I'm charting the correlation between what the characters say and how they really feel." There's fun to be had, perhaps, in doing the same here. During the lunch scene, for instance, it is where the correlation is at its lowest that the erotic tension is at its highest: "And you—live alone?" Carol (Cate Blanchett) asks Thérèse (Rooney Mara), the young shop assistant she has—through an act of discreet machination—picked up. There is no way we can avoid knowing what she wants but there is also no way that anyone could, on the basis of her words, accuse her of that same desire.

This is flirting; but more importantly, this is gay flirting, where clues indecipherable to others are routinely reified (what is it to have 'gaydar?'); and it is gay flirting at a time when disgust and opprobrium were the chief reactions to homosexuality. Even when disapproving, people don't say what they mean: homosexuality in *Carol* is a "pattern of behaviour", a matter of "morality" for "people like *that*". Whether homosexual or homophobe, through this indirectness the speaker is willing the other to call their bluff, in the hope that the interlocutor, by showing that they have read between the lines, will expose themselves as someone who knows *how to* read between the lines, and who knows that there might be something to read there in the first place.

Danny, the "film jerk" with his notepad, at least knows this much. He is, in this at least, alone among the men in the film, who are otherwise characterised by an astounding ignorance, a blindness to all that which does not place them at its centre. They are at the bottom of the epistemic heap; at the top is not, in fact, Carol, but Abby (Sarah Paulson), her best friend and former lover, who we understand to be carrying a torch for her (and to be resigned to this), and who is in some ways the film's 'chorus', knowing more than any other character what the others are thinking, or up to. Abby acts as a mediator, a driver, a convenient excuse, mostly in the service of Carol, enabling her developing relationship with Thérèse. As "Aunt Abby" to Carol's daughter Rindy she is also the archetypal lesbian, and the one person recognised as such, even by men, such as when Carol's soon-to-be ex-husband

Harge remarks, pointedly, that Rindy has been seeing a lot of Abby, lately. His cack-handed foray into reading between the lines is brought ironically into focus: he then mentions that his friend's wife—"Jeanette," Carol cuts in—that Jeanette had asked after her. "Did she?" Carol replies, coolly. "Well, give her my best—I've always liked Jeanette."

Queers have to *know*, and have to know how to know, of course; obliviousness is the prerogative of the privileged. This can, of course, be extended: see, for instance, the (black, queer) poet Fred Moten on the (white) critic **Marjorie Perloff**, here talking about race: "I had to learn about her and many of the things that have gone and continue to go into the making of her. She has never been so obligated, a condition that induces not only ignorance but also cold-heartedness." For the men in the film, there need never be a gap between their will and the world, with the result that they confuse the two, offering desire as a circular justification for itself. Harge turns up at Abby's door and demands to know where Carol is. Abby refuses to tell him. "You've spent ten years making sure her only point of reference is you." Harge can only think to say that he loves Carol. "I can't help you with that," Abby replies—and she isn't unsympathetic: Harge is not a brute, it is just that he has never had not to be one. In what to me is the film's one moment of heavy-handedness, Carol tells him, "we are not ugly people." Yet passivity in the face of one's nature—one's "own grain" as Carol puts it—is something that the men in the film can indulge in, and Harge *is* at times ugly, and we could find it funny—seeing Abby, for instance, shut the door in his desperate face, or when he stumbles, drunkenly, when trying to convince Carol not to go—did it not have the consequences it does for Carol, for Thérèse, for all the women who are not (yet) what they could be.

Men, in *Carol*, are always getting in the way. They intrude, they interrupt, they impose; at one point a tactless young man barges in on a meeting between Carol and Thérèse, echoing *Brief Encounter's* Dolly Messiter in an act of deft, delicate homage. Throughout the film the female characters look out of or are seen through windows—often blurred or rain-flecked—or grates, or grilles, and in the final scene, a crowd of men take their place, blocking our view completely—and that of Thérèse, of Carol. (It is only when they move out of the way the film reaches its—wonderful—conclusion.) The male characters don't recognise any desire that's not their own, any space that might not be theirs to take over. Thérèse, whose face is characteristically impassive, is too young to know how much to let on or to ask about, but, and this is where the film's real optimism lies, also too young to know that she oughtn't take over, that she oughtn't desire. And she also knows—unlike her hapless boyfriend who, like Harge, thinks that to desire a state of affairs is to bring it about, and that "I love you" and "I asked you to marry me" are universally valid justifications—that you have to know what it is that you want, and to know *about* it. (The film takes quite seriously, more, I think, than the book, the importance of knowledge to love, the way, for instance, that love can manifest itself as, and be expressed in, an insatiable desire

for facts: name, living situation, daily routine. Carol wants to know what Thérèse is thinking; Thérèse wants to ask Carol “things she’s not sure she wants asked”; Carol, when they are no longer together, wants to know from Abby what Thérèse is doing, what her day-to-day life looks like. A girl at a party hits, clumsily, on Thérèse by asking if she wants to know how she knows who Thérèse is.)

People have been suggesting, perhaps rightly, that Haynes lost out on the ‘Best Director’ and ‘Best Picture’ nominations for portraying a world in which men are irrelevant, for shutting the door in the face of Harges all over. Or Dannys, with their notebooks, unable to read between the lines when faced with a real, cautious, person—he kisses Thérèse thinking her wariness some form of come-on—but trying, at least, to work out what’s going on. Blanchett and Mara have their nominations, though, which seems fitting (Haynes, in *Carol* and elsewhere, is indebted to Douglas Sirk, and here we might think of his *Imitation of Life* (1959), where the only Oscar nominations were for the two actresses of colour—both “in a supporting role”). *Carol* is, after all, about mistaken or exaggerated self-involvement, about people overenthusiastic to cast themselves, for better or worse, as the “only point of reference”. In this, Thérèse often acts as a sort of proxy for the male characters: “I just take everything and I don’t know anything,” she cries. Both Carol and Abby, when Thérèse blames herself for Harge’s behaviour, or frets about not being able to help Carol, tell her it isn’t her fault, it has nothing to do with her. In the context, of course, they’re right.