

# *Emotions, Body-Language, and Power Dynamics —A Queer Reading of Todd Haynes' Carol*

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**Abstract:** This article studies how Todd Haynes' famous queer film *Carol* (2015) explores the delicate queer relationship through their complex emotions, subtle body language, and power dynamics. *Carol* is a film depicting how two women with distinct age and class gaps fall in love under the pressure of moral standards and social constraints in 1950s America. This article is divided into three sections. The first section is centered on the emotions between Therese and Carol. The second section discusses the power dynamics between them. The third part focuses on body language in *Carol*'s cinematography. After the analysis, this article concludes that the complicated but profound emotions between Carol and Therese make their touches contained but ardent. Therefore, authoritarianism of power does not exist in their relationship, but fluidity of power does. In doing so, this article found out the equality, respects, irrationality and selfishness all exist in Carol and Therese's relationship, their love is profound, contained and relatively equal but also not perfect.

**Keywords:** Queer cinema, *Carol* (2015), Queer feminism, Power Dynamics, Body language in cinema

## 1. Introduction

In 1950s America, homosexuality was met with significant societal stigmatization, yet *Carol* tells the story of two women who fall in love despite these barriers. This article first explores the restrained love between the queer lovers within the context of 1950s society. It then analyzes the complex emotions in Carol and Therese's relationship, founding that their love contains respects, equality, evasion and irrationality. The second part examines the power dynamics between Carol and Therese, which evolve through three phases: Carol's initial dominance, the breaking point of her power, and the emergence of a balanced dynamic as Therese gains more agency. This progression ultimately leads to equality in their relationship. Finally, the article analyzes key scenes to discuss body language and sexual expression in the film. Smoking symbolizes the female characters' quiet resistance and self-awareness, as well as Therese's growth. Driving and photographing capture moments of power for Carol and Therese. The contrasting acts of touching and smelling highlight different expressions of desire, and the analysis of cinematography reveals the tenderness and passion in their queer relationship.

## 2. Literature review

Queer theories and identities have garnered significant scholarly attention and exploration, embodying a profound dedication to denaturalization. As a result, the concept of queer itself lacks a definitive logical foundation or a cohesive set of defining features. It does not inherently refer to a specific entity or possess an inherent essence, making it an identity devoid of a fixed core [1]. This fundamental lack of determinacy renders queer a complex and elusive subject of study, characterized by perpetual ambiguity and relationality. It has been characterized as a theory that relies heavily on intuition and remains partially articulated. Alexander Doty finds appeal in defining queer as a term that offers a flexible framework for expressing the diverse facets of non-normative cultural production and reception, as it accommodates ambiguity and encompasses a broad spectrum of impulses, cultural expressions, as well as descriptions and expressions of bisexuality, transsexuality, and even straight queerness [2].

Widely seen as challenging conventional notions of sexual identity, queer theory deconstructs the categories, oppositions, and equations that uphold these constructs [3]. However, pinpointing the precise significance, scope, or referent of queer is no straightforward task, partly due to its inherent indeterminacy [4]. Concurrently, research into queer intimacy introduces a novel paradigm for examining the diversity of relationships. This queer paradigm acknowledges that intimate connections can exist between individuals sharing the same binary cisgender identity (e.g., male-male, female-female). Its fundamental premise for studying relationship diversity asserts that intimacy is not limited to relationships between individuals of differing binary cisgender identities. Instead, it recognizes that intimacy can be experienced within relationships involving individuals of any gender identity, encompassing those who identify as the same binary cisgender, binary transgender, or gender-nonbinary [5]. Based on these theoretical foundations, this paper will delve into the emotions between Therese and Carol, a Queer couple, in the first section.

Max Weber defines power as "the ability to impose one's will on the actions of others" [6], indicating that power functions within relationships and is exercised through subjective means. This definition implies that powerholders possess the freedom to exert influence. Whether that influence is significant or subtle, it creates a causal link between those who hold power and those subject to it. Simon described power in terms of causality, where "A" has power over "B" if "A's actions cause B's actions [7]." However, power is always relative. Russell observed that "A has more power than B if A achieves many intended outcomes, while B achieves only a few" [8]. This reinforces the idea that power, at its core, is about influence, but it is not absolute. Powerholders may fluctuate, showing that power is not static but can shift and reverse.

Power must be understood within specific contexts. In economics, power often manifests as wealth. Galbraith identified wealth as one of three sources of power (alongside personality and organization), with property being the most direct form of power. Wealth confers authority and a sense of purpose, which can lead to conditioned submission [9]. Wealth provides access to more resources, allowing individuals to take control and lead. Yet, power also involves human psychology, as its influence depends on the minds of those it affects.

In *The Will to Know*, Foucault uses "sexuality" as a focal point for examining power relations [10]. He explores how sexuality is shaped by societal power structures, presenting a "theory of power" that challenges the idea of sexuality as purely biological. In this work, Foucault argues that sexuality is not an inherent, natural phenomenon but is shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. He describes sexuality as a complex system involving physical stimulation, the intensification of pleasure, discourse, knowledge formation, control, and resistance. These elements interact as part of a larger network, shaping sexuality. Foucault also emphasizes the link between knowledge and power, stating that power acts upon the body through knowledge, and knowledge can also be used to resist power.

Thus, understanding sexuality requires examining how society regulates it through power and knowledge.

Foucault highlights the role of resistance within power structures. Although power and knowledge reinforce social norms and control, the potential for resistance remains, allowing individuals to reflect and challenge these structures. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, builds on Foucault's argument that "sexuality and power are coextensive [11]." She expands this idea, suggesting that power encompasses both restrictive and productive functions. For Butler, power is not just a force of repression but also a creative force that shapes identity and sexuality. She questions how, within these constructed power structures, successful acts of subversion or resistance can occur. Butler emphasizes that the repetition and displacement of existing power relations open the possibility for subversive actions.

Furthermore, this article of the role of smoking in the film *Carol* is primarily based on two pieces of research. One is Jerid M. Fisher's article "Sex Differences in Smoking Dynamics," published in 1976 in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* [12], and the other is Luisa F. Ribeiro's 1995 master's thesis from the University of Southern California: *Smoking and Classical Hollywood Cinema, Image and Representation* [13].

Jerid M. Fisher's research examines the different motivations behind smoking for men and women from a psychological perspective [12]. For men, smoking is often associated with comfort, regression, and relaxation. In Fisher's paper, the studies of Bozzetti and Jacobs suggest that men may use smoking to cope with negative emotions, emotional dependence, or even as a defense mechanism projecting self-reliance [14, 15]. However, Fisher's study did not find support for the hypothesis that men primarily smoke for physical comfort. On the contrary, the research found that female smokers focused more on themes of power and autonomy, which aligned with the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Fisher's study incorporated Gough's masculinity-femininity scale to explore whether there were differences in smoking motivations among individuals with high masculinity or femininity scores [16]. The study revealed that the interaction between masculinity, femininity, and smoking behavior was complex. Women with higher femininity scores smoked more and showed a stronger association with themes of power, while men with higher femininity scores found more satisfaction in smoking. This suggests that a smoker's gender identity might influence the psychological benefits they derive from smoking, adding complexity to a simple gender binary. Fisher further explored the connection between smoking and women's pursuit of autonomy. Early studies showed that the increase in smoking among women was often consistent with an increase in social independence, with cigarettes becoming a symbol of empowerment. Matarazzo and Saslow's theory posited that as moral restrictions on women's behavior relaxed, women began smoking in larger numbers [17]. Fisher's research confirmed this, showing that women more frequently associated smoking with power, control, and independence in the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). This supports the view that cigarettes became a way for women to rebel against traditional passive and subordinate roles. Based on this study, Fisher's perspectives on women's motivations for smoking are cited to demonstrate that in *Carol*, smoking acts as a symbol of empowerment, representing women's subjectivity and self-awareness. This, in turn, helps this article to argue that smoking in *Carol* can hint at Therese's personal growth.

The thesis "*Smoking and Classical Hollywood Cinema, Image and Representation*" discusses how smoking was used in classical Hollywood films to shape both male and female images, analyzing the associated gender stereotypes and cultural symbols. Ribeiro [13] argues that smoking, as an act tied to male gender identity, is not merely a prop but a symbol of male power and control, magnified through the cinematic screen. Additionally, the article notes that female characters in classical Hollywood films developed more complex images through smoking. On one hand, smoking became a symbol of modernization and liberation for women, especially in films from the 1920s to the 1940s,

where female smoking scenes were imbued with meanings of freedom and independence. Unlike men, for whom smoking was merely a prop, smoking for women in these films symbolized modern female identity and status. However, smoking was not portrayed entirely positively. Ribeiro points out that in some films, women who smoked were depicted as rebellious or even decadent, often associated with danger and immorality. This complex portrayal reflects society's ambivalent attitude toward female smokers at the time—on the one hand, there was a desire to show women's modern independence, while on the other, there was discomfort with their departure from traditional gender roles. The article also highlights the unique aesthetic function of smoking in certain genres, particularly in film noir. The pervasive smoke on screen not only enhanced the film's sense of mystery and atmosphere but also visually reinforced the complexity of the characters' inner lives. The smoke in these films was often closely tied to moral ambiguity, psychological anxiety, and the characters' fates, serving as a symbol of emotion and suggestion. Additionally, the article discusses the close relationship between Hollywood star images and smoking. Smoking was used to enhance the public image of stars, with film studios particularly utilizing smoking to bolster the unique charm of certain stars. Based on this research, this article will focus on Ribeiro's conclusions about how smoking shaped female characters with traits of rebellion, independence, danger, and allure, and use this analysis to explore the symbolic meaning of smoking in *Carol* in relation to its female characters.

### 3. Emotions in *Carol*

Based on the aforementioned theoretical studies, we define the relationship between Carol and Therese in the film *Carol* as a queer relationship and argue that an intimacy relation exists between them. In the film, Carol and Therese, as two ordinary women, have their own husband and boyfriend respectively. However, this does not necessarily signify that they are rigidly heterosexual; Carol's past relationship with her girlfriend Abby prior to her marriage indicates that her sexual orientation has always been fluid. Similarly, Therese falls in love with Carol upon meeting her, embarking on a female-same-sex romance. In the film, while chatting with her boyfriend Richard, Therese asked whether there are two people who just fall in love with each other. For example, a boy and a boy out of the blue. This also shows that she believes that human love is changeable rather than fixed. However, this does not establish them as static lesbians. Both individuals exhibit fluid sexual orientations, aligning with the characteristic of indeterminacy inherent in queer identities. Thus, the relationship between Carol and Therese is characterized as a queer relationship. The film portrays many intimate and deep interactions between them, demonstrating that intimate relationships can indeed flourish within queer dynamics. This section will analyze complicated and varied emotions presented by two sets of queer relationships in this film.

Firstly, we will explore in detail relationship between Carol and her ex-girlfriend, Abby. Despite being Carol's ex-girlfriend, Abby maintains an intimate friendship, comfortable talking about the new redhead in front of Carol and respectful of Carol's budding romance with Therese. She understands the difficulties of Carol, and when she learns that the morality clause, which restricts Carol from taking care of her daughter, has something to do with her, she feels apologetic and guilty about the damage she has indirectly done to Carol's life; when Harge angrily knocks on Abby's door at night to ask her about Carol's whereabouts, Abby endeavours to defend Carol, and points out that Harge is unreasonably demanding that Carol's life revolve entirely around him. Carol's ongoing friendship with Abby enables the film to complicate its central investment in exclusive love, persisting as one of the longer and deeper relationships of the film [18].

The queer relationship between Therese and Carol, which is the main focus of the film's narrative, represents a rebellion against mainstream heteronormativity under patriarchal society while also depicting a love that is fraught with impulses, hesitations, yet profound mutual understanding and respect between the two women. The encounter between Carol and Therese serves as a catalyst,

igniting not only their pure desire and passion for each other but also amplifying the underlying tensions within their respective heterosexual relationships. This budding queer romance also exposes the fragility of Carol and Therese's original heterosexual relations, and enables them to experience a different expression of queer emotions.

One thing that cannot be ignored is that the film *Carol* is set against the backdrop of 1950s America. However, within the societal context of 1950s America, a postwar era marked by the Cold War, lesbians and gays were stigmatized as deviant minorities, seen as undermining family structures and threatening state stability [19]. Simultaneously, senator McCarthy and others took advantage of anti-communist sentiment during the Cold War, linking homosexuals with communism, claiming that they were more likely to betray their country and join the Soviet camp. These led to the Lavender Scare, a series of discrimination and persecution against homosexuals in the United States under the prevalence of McCarthyism. Although persecution of homosexuals was primarily government-led, moral outrage and panic permeated society at large. In addition, queer women have to face another challenge. They were constrained by the nuclear family ideal, where women were expected to be submissive homemakers, supporting men's dignity and responsibility through child-rearing and housework [20, 21]. Deviating from this norm could spark moral controversy [19].

Under these oppressions, the queer love between Carol and Therese cannot be above board, so is thus subtle and contained. In the film, between Carol and Therese, Carol is able to respect and listen to Therese's thoughts, giving her full support and encouragement, and the same is true between Carol and Abby. The two women in the film can build a relationship where they respect each other's wishes and consciousness, rather than one oppressing and ordering the other. In addition to the mutual understanding and respect they offer each other, the love between Carol and Therese also encompasses impulses, hesitations, avoidances, and the pure sexual desires.

Upon their first encounter, Carol and Therese seemed to exhibit hints of an instant attraction. Therese, with her cute features and a red Christmas hat, standing beside a sign that read "Mommy's Baby, \$8.00", undoubtedly captured Carol's attention. For Carol, a mother herself, Therese's youthful innocence might have triggered some maternal sentiments within her to some extent. Meanwhile, Carol's mature and elegant feminine charm undoubtedly fascinated Therese, leading to an extended conversation between them about children's toys. During their chat, Carol did not look down on Therese because of her status as a salesgirl, but instead approached her with sincerity and friendliness. Their interactions reflect the existence of equality, mutual respect and attraction. After Therese returned Carol's lost gloves, Carol subtly expressed her desire to further cultivate a relationship with this young woman whom she had only just met by offering to treat her to dinner. An impulse, seemingly irrational and immature, propelled the two to meet repeatedly thereafter, even though this emotion threatened to disrupt their respective lives.

After learning about Therese's interest in taking photographs, Carol gives her a new camera for Christmas and watches her photography carefully, giving her dream plenty of support and respect. When Therese nervously comments that her work is not so good, Carol encourages her positively, saying that her work is perfect. Carol's concern and encouragement to Therese's interest in photography have also further nurtured the growing affection between them. At this stage, their relationship remained subtle and ambiguous, yet Carol repeatedly took the initiative to attend to Therese, subtly revealing her intention to further develop a romantic connection. Nevertheless, she was still hesitant, bound by the responsibilities of her family, her daughter, and her role as a mother within her heterosexual relationship. Neither of them had explicitly confessed their feelings to each other, leaving their mutual affections unspoken. Hesitations and confusions are presented in their emotions.

As their affection gradually deepened, Carol and Therese had a sexual relationship during Christmas, only to be secretly monitored. The videotape that preserved evidence of their intimacy

was later used by Harge to hinder Carol from caring for her daughter. Faced with these daunting issues in her life, Carol chose to briefly flee from this queer love and severed ties with Therese. One impressive scene is when Therese proactively reached out to her by phone, Carol picked up but remained silent, only to hang up after hearing Therese's voice. Carol had Therese constantly on her mind, so when she heard Therese's voice, she hesitated, paused, and struggled to restrain her impulse to respond. However, at that moment, she was preoccupied with the issue of raising her daughter, and after hesitation, she chose to end the call. At this moment, despite missing Therese deeply, Carol evaded the problems that had arisen in their relationship, revealing a fragile and passive attitude.

Throughout the film, the emotion between the two women encompasses strong impulses, equal and respectful interactions, and the pursuit of a genuine love, yet it is also fraught with inconsistencies, tensions, and the hesitation and confusion in the process of their love.

#### 4. Power dynamics in *Carol*

Max Weber defines power in his work *Max Weber on Law in Economy and Society* by saying that power is “the possibility of imposing one’s will upon the behavior of other persons”[6]. This suggests two things: firstly, power exists only when there is a relationship between two or among multiple individuals; secondly, power is exerted only when there is subjectivity. Based on this notion, the power structure and relationship between Carol and Therese can be analyzed. The evolution of their power dynamics can be divided into three periods.

During the first period, Carol is in power due to her higher-class status and her wealth. Carol comes from the upper class which gives her a higher level of socioeconomic resources and she is at the disposal of more social power and autonomy. On the other hand, Therese, who comes from a less affluent background and works as a salesgirl, has comparably fewer resources. Along with that, wealth disparity is entailed. As a financially independent woman, Carol enjoys more freedom and has more discourse in this relationship than Therese does. She can invite Therese to have dinner in a fancy restaurant, to visit her house, to have a road trip, etc. As mentioned above, property is the most forthright source of power. In this sense, the disparity in wealth gives Carol control and authority in her relationship with Therese, who experiences an upper-class life under the lead of Carol. Meanwhile, when Therese is introduced to a luxurious lifestyle, her unfamiliarity with such luxuries, due to her limited wealth, makes her constrained and nervous, reflected by her following behind Carol without speaking when entering an upmarket restaurant and her following Carol’s food choice when ordering, through which she shows dependence on Carol. However, it should also be admitted that Therese's youth could be seen as an “asset”, meaning a financial “superiority” can be relativized by another one like “youth”, as older women have a lower level of self-esteem [22]. Apart from the economic factor, Carol is initially in power because she has more knowledge in sexuality than Therese does. Carol, as an older and more experienced woman, occupies a position of power in this relationship because she not only has a clearer understanding of her sexuality but also dares to challenge social norms. However, this position of power is also fragile, as she simultaneously faces multiple forms of oppression from the law, family, and societal opinion. In the film, the color of the clothes also suggests Carol’s original dominance. Carol wears red so often that red is almost her signature color. Meanwhile, red in cinema is a way to express militancy, danger, dominance, and power [23]. Thus it indicates Carol’s power.

The second period of the power dynamics between Carol and Therese can be marked by Carol’s vulnerability. She first showed her vulnerability when she called Therese by telephone after she argued with Harge. She shook her hands and trilled her voice when begging Therese to ask something. At this moment, Carol becomes the one who is in the lower position of this relationship, and Therese takes the discourse, which is the breaking point of Carol’s power. However, at this point, Therese has not grown her subjectivity, but a possibility of inversion of power can be already seen.



The third period, where Therese comes to take power, is marked by Therese's subjectivity. Before, Therese always said "I don't know" whenever someone proposes something to her. She does not accept, nor does she refuse. However, after the night she sees the dispute between Carol and Harge and Carol's vulnerability, she begins to think about the true meaning of love and marriage, from which her subjectivity starts to grow. This time she disposes of her ambiguity and refuses directly Richard's proposal which does not interest her. Therese begins to choose what she is inclined to, instead of resigning herself. Also, Therese here begins to wear red, which suggests her self-awareness is growing. Having broken up with Richard, Therese went on the trip with Carol, during which she wears red rather than Carol, suggesting that the power is gradually being transferred from Carol to Therese.



Figure 1: Carol and Therese were eating together (*Carol*, 2015)

After her sex with Carol is recorded, she feels guilty. Instead of self-resentment, she resorts to self-reflection, through which she realizes that she can only know what she wants when she starts to refuse. She begins to care about her own needs instead of blindly catering to those of others.



Figure 2: Therese was reflecting on her past behavior with Carol (*Carol*, 2015)

Encouraged by Carol, Therese pursues her dream to be a photographer, which also reflects Therese's focus on herself. She no longer continues in a career she dislikes and begins to value her talent for photography, gradually becoming a magazine photographer, which signifies her taking control of her life. All this preliminary growth of self-awareness contributes to her acquiring power in her relationship with Carol. Carol broke up with Therese after the trip and disappeared. Long after, when Carol proposes to restart this relationship, Therese refuses, which is the first time she has refused Carol. In doing so, she expresses her disappointment with Carol and respects herself. Also, the refusal marks Therese's taking control of this relationship. Since the beginning of this relationship, Carol has directed the relationship: Carol makes the first move to Therese, creates opportunities to enhance their emotional connection, ends their relationship, and now wants to rekindle it. Therese's refusal signifies her authority on the future of their relationship.

Nevertheless, Therese's acquiring power does not equate to Carol's losing power. Carol still preserves her power in this relationship if it continues to exist, as her social class and her socioeconomic resources are still advantageous to Therese's. But with a promising career and a mind of subjectivity, Therese has become independent. Thereafter, she has her discourse which Carol also respects. In this case, the power becomes dynamic and fluid with no absolute. In the switching of power, a dynamic equilibrium is achieved between Carol and Therese.

## 5. Body language in *Carol*

In traditional Hollywood films, the action of smoking is usually associated with men and directly linked to questions of masculinity [13]. However, in *Carol*, smoking is closely related to women rather than being an exclusively male activity.

### 5.1. Smoking

In traditional films, the action of smoking is usually associated with men. However, in *Carol*, smoking is closely related to women rather than being an exclusively male activity.

#### 5.1.1. Smoking represents the subjectivity and self-awareness of female characters

In the film, characters like Carol, Therese, Abby, and even a female relative of Carol (Jeanette), all smoke. In the scene at 25:46, Jeanette nervously runs to a window with a cigarette and asks Carol to keep watch. Carol responds with humor, questioning what her husband would do, and then lights Jeanette's cigarette, Jeanette complained her husband disliked her smoking, they leading to a shared smile and then talking about their Christmas's planning.



Figure 3: Carol and Jeanette were smoking at the prom (*Carol*, 2015)

This scene, bathed in dark and yellowish lighting, highlights the contrast between their polished appearance and the act of smoking. Jeanette, elegantly dressed with gloves, seems out of place with a cigarette, symbolizing how smoking defies the constraints of their wealthy social class. The perspective, as if shot from the outside looking in through the window, suggests their behavior is hidden and not socially accepted, reinforcing the idea that these women are bound by societal norms.

Research has found that women's smoking is often associated with power, control, independence, and autonomy [12]. In films from the 1920s to the 1940s, scenes of women smoking were imbued with meanings of freedom and independence [13]. Therefore, cigarettes for women symbolize power. In the movie *Carol*, despite her husband opposing her smoking, Jeanette still enjoys smoking. Here, smoking as body language symbolizes Jeanette's resistance against patriarchy, showing that these women have the courage to resist the restrictions and oppression of a male-dominated society, while also being clear about what they like and wants.

At the same time, Carol and Abby also frequently smoke throughout the film. However, unlike Jeanette, whose smoking clearly signifies resistance against patriarchy, Carol and Abby often smoke



while conversing, such as when discussing Carol's family or Carol's complex feelings for Therese—topics that are emotionally heavy and complex. In these moments, smoking carries more dangerous and alluring connotations. The smoke visually enhances the complexity of the characters' inner lives and is often associated with signals of moral ambiguity and psychological anxiety [13]. Thus, the act of smoking in the movie *Carol* helps further shape the complex and captivating female characters, highlighting their independence and subjectivity.

### **5.1.2. Smoking symbolizes the growth of Therese's self-awareness**

Unlike Carol and Abby, who smoke confidently, Therese starts as inexperienced. During their first meal together, Carol offers her a cigarette, and Therese's awkward attempt, resulting in a cough, reflects her uncertainty and lack of self-assurance. At this stage, Therese is a young woman unsure of herself and unable to refuse. As her relationship with Carol deepens, she becomes more comfortable with smoking, symbolizing her gradual journey toward self-awareness. By the film's end, Therese is seen sorting through her photos, with smoked cigarettes beside them. This implies that Therese now smokes on her own. Combined with her decision to submit her work, symbolizes her growth into a more self-aware individual who has learned to embrace her desires. Smoking thus acts as a thread linking her journey from uncertainty to independence and subjectivity.

Smoking, an act often seen as rebellious, improper, and forbidden, weaves throughout the narrative, highlighting the subjectivity of the female characters and marking Therese's transformation. Even small characters like Jeanette display a sense of agency, indicating that the women in this story are more than mere appendages to men; they possess their own desires and identities, quietly defying the constraints of their time.

## **5.2. Driving vs. photographing**

### **5.2.1. Driving as Carol's control**

Driving represents power through the ability to decide direction and destination. Carol frequently drives Therese to various places, symbolizing her role as the decision-maker in their relationship. The car's confined space suggests that their love exists within societal restrictions. Carol's position as the driver underscores her control within these boundaries.

### **5.2.2. Photographing as Therese's control**

Photographing represents Therese's moments of control, as the photographer decides what to capture and how to frame it. Therese often photographs Carol, signaling that she isn't entirely passive but also exercises control in their relationship. Photography not only reflects her growing interest in the craft but also her ability to assert herself within the dynamic.

The alternating control in driving and photographing illustrates the fluid power dynamics between Carol and Therese, suggesting a relatively equal emotional connection within their queer relationship.

### 5.3. Sexual expressions

#### 5.3.1. Touching



Figure 4: Carol and Therese reunite at the diner (*Carol*, 2015)

In *Carol*, touch is an essential element in the interactions between Carol and Therese. They often gently caress each other's shoulders, hair, and cheeks—these actions are non-sexual yet deeply affectionate. Among these gestures, touching the shoulder recurs frequently, becoming a key symbol of their relationship. We have chosen a representative scene (Figure 4) to analyze the significance of this action.

In the restaurant scene where Carol and Therese reunite after a long separation, Therese's friend Jack interrupts their conversation and offers Therese a ride. Carol takes the initiative to leave and gently touches Therese's shoulder. This action occurs under warm, dim lighting, and primary light source is a table lamp, clearly illuminating Therese's expression. Carol's vivid red nails contrast against Therese's dark clothing, making her hand movement (touching) particularly noticeable. The director uses Therese's position leaning towards Carol and the table lamp's light to clearly show her face to reveal her inner sense of loss and reluctance, allowing the audience to observe the entire moment from a third-person perspective. This subtly suggests that the relationship between Carol and Therese is not over; their connection through touch continues. The act of touching the shoulder becomes a coded signal of mutual understanding, symbolizing their care and attention toward each other.

#### 5.3.2. Smelling

If touching expresses care, smelling carries even more sexual connotations. Attracted by Carol's scent, Harge embraces her and smells her, but Carol angrily resists—indicating Harge's sexual desire for Carol but Carol dislike it. What's more, Harge's action of smelling without any asking conveys his disrespecting to Carol.

In contrast, when Therese is drawn to Carol's scent, her response is much more restrained. She first secretly smells Carol's clothes and only approaches Carol to smell her again when invited by Carol herself. This comparison highlights the different expressions of desire through the same action: Harge's approach is forceful, while Therese's is gentle and reserved.

The simple act of smelling not only conveys their desires but also emphasizes the contrast between Harge's aggressiveness and Therese's tender restraint.

### 5.3.3. Sex



Figure 5: Carol and Therese are having sex (*Carol*, 2015)

In *Carol*, the sex scene between Carol and Therese is particularly noteworthy. The director uses dim yellow lighting, with only a bedside lamp illuminating their faces and bodies, hinting at the secrecy of their relationship. The camera primarily uses medium and close-up shots. The medium shots highlight their positioning, emphasizing Carol's dominant role in the relationship. However, when Therese says, "Don't. I want to see you," and refuses to turn off the light, it shows her own autonomy in the relationship, indicating that it is not a one-sided dynamic.

The close-up shots focus on their eye contact and intimate actions. The director avoids overemphasizing sexual organs and instead captures the details of their movements and expressions, highlighting their connection and passion. The scene is filmed entirely from a third-person perspective, using dim yellow-green lighting, tender yet intense dialogue, and slow, deliberate movements to present a sexual encounter free of coercion or humiliation.

Overall, the film's depiction of Carol and Therese's sexual relationship is delicate, tender, and passionate. Through a combination of medium and close-up shots from a third-person perspective, the director objectively portrays the warmth, passion, and mutual respect in this queer relationship.

## 6. Conclusion

In *Carol*, the queer relationship between Carol and Therese can be found to be fluid in their position of power, complex and deep in their emotions, and restrained and intense in their body language. By analyzing these elements, this paper identifies a model of a relationship that is equal yet complex, restrained yet passionate. Taking place in 1950s America when heteronormativity was prevalent, Carol and Therese's relationship offers a vision of equality and mutual respect. The fluidity of power between them-allowing for shifts unencumbered by societal expectations-is key to this model. In addition, their body language reflected self-awareness and personal sexual desires, embodying the spirit of equality suggested by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, while leaving room for deeper emotional connections. Carol and Therese celebrate queer love, challenging traditional relationships and urging us to seek deeper, more authentic connections.

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