

Portraying Homosexuality in Hollywood: The Case of *The Children's Hour* and *Carol*

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Abstract

This essay seeks to analyse the depiction of homosexuality in the films *The Children's Hour* (1961) and *Carol* (2015). For that purpose, we start by considering the main plot points of each film. Then we move into an overview of the cultural and social background of each work. In the case of *The Children's Hour*, we discuss the relationship between this and other Hollywood films from that time with the same subject. We also take into consideration the reception of the homonymous play by Lillian Hellman that inspired this film. As far as *Carol* is concerned, we delve into the social circuit of Patricia Highsmith (the author of the novel on which *Carol* is based): 1950s New York. As a result, we realise the importance of such a novel being published in 1952, as well as a possible reason why it was just now made into a film. Finally, we compare how both films portray homosexuality and lesbian love stories, relating their differences to each film's historical background.

Keywords: Cinema; Hollywood; Homosexuality; Representation; Society

Resumo

Este ensaio procura analisar a representação da homossexualidade nos filmes *The Children's Hour* (1961) e *Carol* (2015). Para isso, primeiro são considerados os momentos mais marcantes da ação de cada filme. Posteriormente, passamos a uma análise do contexto cultural e social de cada obra. No caso de *The Children's Hour*, é discutida a relação que se estabelece entre este e outros filmes de Hollywood da época com a mesma temática, bem como a receção da peça homónima de Lillian Hellman que inspirou este filme. Relativamente a *Carol*, embrenhamo-nos no circuito social de Patricia Highsmith (a autora do romance em que *Carol* se baseia): a Nova Iorque dos anos 1950. Desta forma, compreendemos a importância da publicação desta obra em 1952, mas também refletimos sobre o possível motivo de só no século XXI ter sido adaptada ao cinema. Por fim, comparamos a forma como ambos os filmes

representam a homossexualidade e histórias de amor entre lésbicas, estabelecendo uma relação entre as suas diferenças e o contexto histórico de cada filme.

Palavras-chave: Cinema; Hollywood; Homossexualidade; Representação; Sociedade

Introduction

To begin to think about cinematic representations of homosexuality, first we need to consider two important things: the kind of cinema we aim to analyse and the time of production. These aspects are very important as they provide us a framework for the interpretation of any film. Therefore, for us to analyse either *The Children's Hour* or *Carol*, we must bear in mind that both are products of Hollywood, and, for that reason, they are surely different from European films that share the same subject matter, like *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019) or *La vie d'Adèle* (2013), for instance. Furthermore, both the period depicted in the film and the time of its actual production can, and usually do, influence the way the film depicts this subject matter.

The Children's Hour (1961) was directed by William Wyler and is based on a play from 1934 by Lillian Hellman. Unsurprisingly, the film depicts that time's society in terms of beliefs and behaviours towards this subject. *Carol*, on the other hand, is a 2015 film whose script is based on a book from 1952 by Patricia Highsmith. It does deviate a bit from its source material, but it perfectly captures the feelings and overall message the book sought to convey – a message far less gloomy than that of *The Children's Hour*. So, for us to understand what makes them so different, it's important to consider each film's main plot points.

1. Plot

1.1. *The Children's Hour*

This film stars Audrey Hepburn as Karen Wright and Shirley MacLaine as Martha Dobie. Karen and Martha are two friends who own a girls' boarding school, where they are accused of being lovers. They are not, however, romantically involved; Karen is even engaged to a doctor called Joseph Cardin. The person responsible for the false accusation is a student at this school. Her name is Mary Tilford and she is a very troublesome, spoiled and manipulative girl. She is constantly whining, lying, and making things up.

A series of events leads to that accusation. First, Mary overhears a conversation between the two teachers, in which Martha tells Karen that she wants the best for her

and then she sees Karen kissing Martha on the cheek. Then, two other students eavesdrop another conversation, now between Martha and her aunt. Mrs. Mortar, who assists Karen and Martha at the school, accuses her niece of not wanting Karen to marry Joseph. She tells her that she is jealous of the couple and that she doesn't want anybody to like Karen. Lily Mortar tells Martha that she has been like that since she was a child and that she considers that behaviour unnatural. Later, after Mary becomes aware of the conversation between Martha and Mrs. Mortar, she tells her grandmother about both conversations and insinuates that Karen and Martha are lovers. Mary is mad at Karen because she rebuked her for lying. She wants to get back at her teachers, so she insinuates they are lovers based only on what she has seen and what she was told.

Amelia Tilford, Mary's grandmother, proceeds to share what she was told with the other parents, who "quickly withdraw their daughters from the school" (Titus 216). For Karen and Martha's despair, no one cares to explain why they are doing it. Eventually, one man tells them what he has heard about them. After learning that the rumour had been spread by Mrs. Tilford, they confront her, but she doesn't change her opinion. Karen and Martha try to sue Mrs. Tilford for libel, but they lose the case because Martha's aunt doesn't show up in court to testify on their behalf.

1.2. *Carol*

Carol, directed by Todd Haynes and starred by Cate Blanchett as Carol Aird and Rooney Mara as Therese Belivet, was based upon Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Price of Salt*, published in 1952 under the pseudonym Claire Morgan. Highsmith came up with an outline for this novel in December 1948, while working at a department store in Manhattan. In her review of the film for *The New Yorker*, Margaret Talbot recounts that Highsmith was enthralled by a woman who had bought a doll from her desk. As a result, she created Carol, who is also based on another woman she had met called Marijane Meaker (Talbot n. pag.).

To create Therese, Highsmith drew inspiration from her own life, since Therese works at a department store at the beginning of the film and it is there that she meets Carol, a woman looking for a Christmas present for her daughter, Rindy. From that moment on, the two women start to meet regularly. First, they go out for lunch. Then, Therese visits Carol's house, where she ends up meeting Carol's husband, whom she's divorcing. Harge isn't happy about the divorce, so he gets angry when he sees Therese there. He is aware of Carol's previous involvement with another woman, Rindy's godmother and Carol's best friend, Abby Gerhard.

Later, Carol is told by her lawyer that Harge wants full custody of their daughter and that he is petitioning the judge to consider a “morality clause” (*Carol*).¹ He makes use of Carol’s romantic involvement with women as leverage to get full custody of Rindy. As she is not allowed to see her daughter for a few months, Carol decides to go on a road trip and invites Therese to join her. Therese instantly accepts the invitation, which leads to a fight with Richard, the man she had been dating for a while. Richard wishes to marry Therese and he is constantly saying that they should go on a trip to Europe, something that she seems reluctant to do. When he learns that she is going away with Carol instead, he accuses Therese of having a “silly crush” on her and they end up their relationship.

During the road trip, they are spied on by a man hired by Harge. This man succeeds in gathering proof of their relationship, which is used against Carol in Rindy’s custody case. The trip comes to a grinding halt and Carol goes back to New York to settle the issue. Carol and Therese grow apart and stop seeing each other. However, in a meeting with Harge and their lawyers, Carol “finally rejects the prospect of ‘living against [her] grain’” (White 15). She relinquishes “custody of her daughter . . . and move[s] out to live on her own” (12).

2. Background

2.1. Depicting gay characters in mid-century Hollywood

The 1995 documentary *The Celluloid Closet* provides a significant glimpse into Hollywood’s representation of gay characters. And, as a matter of fact, “[i]n a hundred years of movies, homosexuality has only rarely been depicted on the screen. When it did appear, it was there as something to laugh at . . . to pity... or even . . . fear” (*The Celluloid Closet*).² Gay characters were usually depicted in negative ways. Therefore, Hollywood films “were criticized for reproducing dominant stereotypes of homosexuals”, the unnatural woman being one of them (Smelik 136). These stereotypes instilled prejudice in straight viewers and encouraged self-hatred in gay and lesbian spectators (136). Basically, Hollywood “taught straight people what to think about gay people and gay people what to think about themselves” (*The Celluloid Closet*).³

For decades, homosexual characters “were taunted, ridiculed, silenced and pathologized, and more often than not killed off in the last reel” (Smelik 135). They were usually unhappy, desperate, and suicidal (*The Celluloid Closet*).⁴ So, Martha Dobie’s fate in *The Children’s Hour*, as it happens, was but one example of this culture.

In 1934, when Lillian Hellman's play debuted, it was illegal to portray (or even hint at) homosexuality on the New York stage. But since the show was a massive success, it was allowed to run normally (Brathwaite n. pag.). As a result,

Hollywood decided to adapt *The Children's Hour* into a movie, but with the newly enacted Hays Code⁵ in place, the issue of homosexuality was completely scrubbed from the resulting film, 1936's *These Three*, directed by William Wyler. Instead of a rumored lesbian relationship, one of the women was accused of having an affair with the other's fiancé. (Brathwaite n. pag.)

By 1961, the Code had eased, so Wyler decided to readapt Hellman's play, this time respecting its original plot (Brathwaite n. pag.). "To depict homosexuality, or 'sexual perversion', however, one had to cast it in the most unsympathetic and unflattering light possible. And *The Children's Hour* is a prime example of that" (Brathwaite n. pag).

The Children's Hour, unlike *Carol*, does not try to portray homosexuality as a normal thing. It is far more concerned with the society's moral view of the subject than with portraying gay women as normal. In this film, not a single person seems to believe that being gay is not wrong. Martha loathes herself when she realizes she is in love with Karen. Karen, who loves Martha as a friend, tries to dismiss what Martha tells her. Everybody else obviously condemns homosexuality. They might not want to discuss it, but they acknowledge it.

The events of the film "are structured around gossip, misinterpretation, and lies" (Young 3). Still, everyone is quick to jump to conclusions. They do not confront the two women and avoid talking to them, as if they were afraid of them. They don't have solid proof of their involvement, but the sheer possibility is enough for them to condemn both women. The film simply portrays the homophobic and prejudiced society of the time. It does not try to suggest that being homophobic or prejudiced is wrong. Quite the opposite. And having the only gay character commit suicide at the end of the film is the way of showing that. In this film, to be gay is to be doomed. It provides a shallow and uninformed vision of the subject, which was the dominant view of this matter at the time. There is no happy ending.

2.2. Lesbian Community in 1950s New York

But there might be a happy ending in *Carol*. Unlike Hellman, Highsmith was a lesbian. And according to Talbot, she once met a writer named Marijane Meaker at a lesbian

bar in Greenwich Village who used to write lesbian pulp novels under a pseudonym. However, her editor insisted that her stories couldn't "end well for their heroines" (Talbot n. pag.). In other words, "novels could depict 'perverse' sexuality", but they could not endorse it (Talbot n. pag.). So Meaker had to abide by that. But she and the other costumers at the bar knew Highsmith was the author of *The Price of Salt* and they loved it for its possibility of a happy ending (Talbot n. pag.).

Of course, this fact alone sets Highsmith's novel apart from Hellman's play. According to Armato, Hellman regarded *The Children's Hour* as a story about goodness and badness (443). And although some critics "see Karen Wright and Martha Dobie as 'good' characters who are victimized by 'evil' Mary Tilford" (443), Armato argues that Karen and Martha are, in fact, victimizers who later become victims themselves (445). In this sense, Martha's homosexuality feels more like a plot device, and one can debate if *The Children's Hour* is even a queer film, or just a film which employs homosexuality to justify a character's downfall.

That is not the case with *Carol* or *The Price of Salt*. The setting of the novel is "Greenwich Village in the 1950s, mythical space of dyke bars, butch-femme romance, police raids, and racial mixing" (White 11). Highsmith frequently visited these bars. However, "instead of gratifying the wish to see what lesbian New York was really like", she only "depicts a lover's world" in her novel (11). But this doesn't mean that the film doesn't provide a glimpse into that New York. It does, but in a subtle manner. There is a passage in the book that perfectly introduces this subject.

Was it love or wasn't it that she felt for Carol? . . . She had heard about girls falling in love, and she knew what kind of people they were and what they looked like. Neither she nor Carol looked like that. Yet the way she felt about Carol passed all the tests for love and fitted all the descriptions. (Highsmith 100)

Here, Therese realizes that her relationship with Carol is not "conventionally heterosexual nor stereotypically lesbian" (Breen 11). And this is a subject tackled by the film since it also provides lesbian representation through iconography. In point of fact, "[v]isual and aural details can be used to typify homosexuality" (Smelik 137). For instance, "codes in dressing, certain gestures, stylistic decor, or extended looks can at glance invoke the homosexuality of a character" (137). Besides making "homosexuality visible", "[s]tereotyping through iconography . . . categorizes the gay or lesbian character as distinct from straight characters and maintains the boundaries between them" (137).

There is a scene in which Therese is in a record store and she spots a butch-femme couple lurking in the background. These are the people she talks about in that quote. Neither Therese nor Carol look like that, and “the film pointedly contrasts [their] style” with the stereotypical butch-femme stylings of the mid-century (White 14). Through the camera shots we learn the significance of the scene. There is a close-up of Therese’s face and then a point of view-shot that allows us to see what it was that Therese was looking at with such a stern countenance. The next shot is another close-up of Therese’s face, who is still looking back, which underlines the importance of the previous shot. She doesn’t talk to these women. But this eye contact is enough for us to understand that Therese is acknowledging the presence of other gay women around her, what makes her wonder about the nature of her own relationship with Carol.

By the end of the film, Therese meets a woman at a party. This woman resembles her and Carol’s style, but she doesn’t seem to be more comfortable around her than she was with those other women. When she notices she is being looked at, she immediately looks away. In this scene, it is the focus of the camera that draws our attention to this interaction. Later, that woman strikes up a conversation with Therese and we can understand how uncomfortable Therese feels because of the way the scene is shot. There is a full shot of the people in that room. We are looking from the outside; we can only see through the windows. Therese is standing at the window on the left, and the other woman is looking at her on the right. The distance between them is emphasized by the blind spot between the windows. The conversation is rather brief and in the next scene she is locked up in the bathroom smoking, away from that woman and everybody else. The framing of this last scene is particularly relevant, as it reinforces our interpretation of this moment in the film and its overall significance. Therese feels trapped in that party. She’s uncomfortable so she escapes to the bathroom. The framing of this scene suggests that sense of trap because our perspective of Therese is partially blocked by the wall. And this is a recurrent framing throughout the film. “Images are often partially blocked as if viewed by someone in hiding” (White 14).

In fact, we can learn even more about Therese and Carol’s relationship just by *looking* at the film. There are many scenes in which we see them through windows, sometimes even wet with raindrops or steam. Being such a recurrent framing, we could argue that the presence of glass in these scenes stands for the obstacles they face to be with each other. When they are the furthest apart that they’ve ever been,

it is through the window of her taxi on her way to the lawyer's office that Carol sees Therese in the street.

3. Portraying homosexuality in *The Children's Hour* and *Carol*

The plot of *The Children's Hour* is instigated by a child's accusation that destroys the reputation of two women.⁶ And even though both are affected by that accusation, Martha is the one who pays the ultimate price. She is constantly being attacked, especially by her aunt, who keeps calling her behaviour unnatural. And this is a crucial word, both for the plot of the film and the message it carries. There's a scene in which Martha's aunt tells her that God will punish her. Martha simply replies: "He's doing alright" (*The Children's Hour*).⁷

By the end of the film, Martha realizes that she is, indeed, in love with Karen. And the scene in which she reveals it to Karen captures the way homosexuals could be led to feel about themselves because of the way the society they lived in regarded homosexuality. She is only now realizing that she is gay. She's shocked and she is not able to talk about it directly, just like everybody else. Homosexuality is a beast whose name cannot be pronounced. She thinks she's a foul person for loving Karen because other people think it is wrong for a woman to love another. She feels ruined and dirty and wishes to get away from Karen. Her self-hatred leads her to suicide. In Martha's case, the loss of reputation is not enough punishment for her "unnatural" behaviour. She has to die, and that is the message of the film.

What we see in *Carol*, however, could not be more different. Therese is in love with Carol, and she never seems to take an interest in any other woman besides Carol. Before her, we only know that she dated Richard, despite not actually loving him or liking being around him. On the other hand, she immediately takes a liking to Carol. In this film, Carol and Therese are portrayed as two people who fall in love. They just happen to be two women. And "Haynes's approach suits the novel, which is neither prim nor explicit about the women's affair" (Talbot n. pag.). Furthermore, the words "lesbian" or "homosexual" are never mentioned. In a conversation with Richard, Therese asks him if he has ever been in love with a boy. He says he hasn't but has heard of people "like that". "I don't mean people like that. I mean two people who fall in love with each other. Say, a boy and a boy, out of the blue" (*Carol*)⁸. It's not that these characters are avoiding labels. They just don't think of gender as something that defines who they should love.

Moreover, the film depicts a world "where two women in love might live together, hiding in plain sight as roommates, more easily than two gay men or an

unmarried heterosexual couple might” (Talbot n. pag.). According to the director, “the ‘unimagined notions of what love between women might look like’ is the engine of Highsmith’s plot” (Talbot n. pag.).

It’s worth noticing, however, that while this portrayal of their love normalizes same-sex relationships, it also seems to set them apart from other lesbian couples, those who look nothing like Carol and Therese. In breaking stereotypes, this depiction of their relationship could promote prejudice towards more stereotypical representations of lesbians.

The nature of Therese and Carol’s relationship is also captured in the novel’s first title, *The Price of Salt*. It’s a strange name, but it makes sense if we think of their relationship as salt. Essentially, this film “shows the price that [Carol] willingly pays for her taste of salt”, that is, the price she pays to be with whom she loves (White 8). And the same happens with Therese. As Breen (10) puts it, “[s]alt” . . . stands for flavour and, more resonantly, vitality and self-preservation. For Therese a life without Carol would seem to be a life without salt. Yet the price of loving Carol might well be emotional devastation”. Doubtlessly, there are “emotional and social costs that are exacted of Therese and Carol for falling in love with each other” (10). Carol loses custody of her child and Therese gives up the chance of marrying a man and live a “normal” life (in accordance with society’s standards). But they are willing to pay that price because they refuse to live against who they are.

Conclusion

It is clear that both films portray homosexuality very differently, and they do so because they’re representative of two different approaches to lesbian love stories in American cinema. On the one hand, *The Children’s Hour* is a film from the 1960s based on a story from the 1930s. Therefore, its depiction of homosexuality is an example of the culture of moralism in Hollywood that we’ve discussed earlier. *Carol*, on the other hand, is a very different project. It was made in the 21st century by a gay director and the novel in which it is based, although published seventy years ago, is the work of a woman who actually experienced what she was writing about.

The disparity in the behaviour of the women in these films shapes the message each one provides about homosexuality. All of them pay some sort of price for being gay. Martha feels like she has to give up on her life; that’s the price she has to pay for loving Karen. Therese and Carol are also willing to pay something for their love, but they are not willing to give up on each other. In short, we’re talking about two texts written around eighteen years apart (a period during which World War II took place)

and two films released over fifty years apart. For that reason, it is safe to say that both films are a product of their time. *Carol* is not the first Hollywood film to portray a lesbian love story in such a favourable way, but it's a sign of the effort that is being made, now more than ever before, to bring more diverse and inclusive realities to the big screen.

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¹ *Carol* 00:45:58-00:46:38.

² *The Celluloid Closet* 00:02:38-00:02:57.

³ *The Celluloid Closet* 00:03:13-00:03:21.

⁴ *The Celluloid Closet* 00:55:21-00:55:30.

⁵ The Motion Picture Production Code (or the Hays Code) "regulated film content for nearly 40 years, restricting, among other things, depictions of homosexuality. Filmmakers still managed to get around the Code, but gay characters were cloaked in innuendo, leading to some necessary decoding" (Brathwaite n. pag.).

⁶ In both films, children are kept apart from women who are assumed to be lesbians. Although both films deal with the idea that children have to be protected from homosexuals, *The Children's Hour* is much more drastic. Karen and Martha lose all their students as soon as the gossip spreads out. *Carol*, on the other hand, is still allowed to see her daughter after her involvement with Therese is made public.

⁷ *The Children's Hour* 01:16:22-01:16:26.

⁸ *Carol* 00:51:18-00:51:37.