Carol and *The Danish Girl*: Real problems, but the danger of exclusivism

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Carol, *directed by Todd Haynes and written by Phyllis Nagy, based on the novel by Patricia Highsmith;* The Danish Girl, *directed by Tom Hooper and written by Lucinda Coxon, based on the novel by David Ebershoff*

Two new films, *Carol* and *The Danish Girl*, address significant subjects that could potentially shed light on society and its moral and psychological condition. Each deals with painful, intimate issues of sexual life and the ostracism with which the social order treats people whose behavior is considered unconventional, or even threatening, to moral norms.

The more noteworthy and weightier of the two, *Carol*, is about a lesbian relationship in post-war America. The other, *The Danish Girl*, concerns itself with one of the first identifiable individuals, a Danish artist, to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. It is set in Europe in the 1920s.

Both films have been favorably received, in part because they are stories about recognizable human types and conditions, i.e., they are not bombastic, empty, pyrotechnical pieces. *Carol* and *The Danish Girl* are intelligently made, visually appealing and relatively engaging. However, it would be naïve not to recognize that the films' attraction for certain social layers has something to do as well with their preoccupation with questions of gender and sexuality.

Carol

Todd Haynes' *Carol*, adapted from Patricia Highsmith's novel, *The Price of Salt* (1952), published under a pen-name because of its subject matter, depicts the love affair over the holidays in 1952–53 between a married woman of means and a younger shop girl, an aspiring photographer.

Carol (Cate Blanchett), impeccably and expensively decked out, is in the process of divorcing her banker husband Harge (Kyle Chandler). She meets the shy, introspective Therese (Rooney Mara) while Christmas shopping in a New York City department store. There is an almost immediate electricity between the two. But Harge is desperate to hold onto his wife and willing to use Carol's past "immoral" relationship with Abby (Sarah Paulson) as leverage to obtain sole custody of their young daughter.

Meanwhile, Therese is warding off the advances of her boyfriend Richard (Jake Lacy), who wants to marry her and whisk her off to Paris precisely at the moment when she is awakening to her true sexual feelings. She jumps at the chance to take a road trip with Carol, who is distraught over the threatened loss of her daughter. The older woman also gives Therese an expensive camera, enabling her to begin to develop her artistic proclivities. They consummate their love in Waterloo, Iowa. Like its famous European namesake, this Midwestern town becomes the scene of a major, although perhaps not final "defeat."

Haynes has an uneven, sometimes interesting history as a filmmaker. *Safe* (1995) and *Mildred Pierce* (2011), a miniseries made for HBO, are probably his most successful efforts, but *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and *Far From Heaven* (2002) also have their moments. *Carol* is an often elegant film, with a deliberately artificial and eye-popping look—although the monotonous score is something of a drawback.

Although watchable and intelligent, the movie never comes to satisfying dramatic life. This is principally so because the filmmakers devote almost all their intellectual energy and effort to underscoring the homosexual character of the relationship to the exclusion of nearly every other feature. The characters and situations in *Carol* that fall outside that relationship are treated essentially as plot devices and given short shrift. They clearly do not arouse that much interest on the director's part.

Moreover, the film's attitude toward Harge and Richard in particular, and the male characters in general, is for the most part hostile and contemptuous. The (heterosexual) men are crude, loud and boorish. To a large extent, the narrative boils down to a couple of sensitive women navigating their way through a world of masculine bullies.

This self-servingly distorted view of things affects the drama, creates inconsistencies and weakens *Carol* 's overall impact. For example, why are these two men so strenuously pursuing women who are obviously not interested in them, and in Carol's case, demonstrably not drawn to the male sex? And why, after all the supposed misery that the thought of losing her daughter brings Carol, does she give up any rights more or less without a second thought?

And there are other issues. The film's—and its central characters'—general lack of sympathy for humanity as a whole results in an overall coldness. Carol and Therese hardly seem to spare a single thought for anything or anyone but themselves. No doubt Blanchett has been directed or chosen to be chilly, to go along with her upper-class existence and lifestyle, but in the process the director and actress have forgotten to make her especially appealing or intriguing.

There are a few moments when Blanchett breaks from her icy demeanor and shows some passion. One comes when Carol discovers that she and Therese are being snooped on and recorded. Another occurs when she and her husband are alone with their divorce attorneys—Carol forthrightly defends her actions, announcing that she cannot "go against my grain."

The production notes assert that *Carol* portrays "the transitional period of the 1950s following the end of World War II. America is marked by feelings of both paranoia and optimism." Were this the case, it would be a better work. Except for a brief television clip of President Dwight Eisenhower's inaugural speech in January 1953 and the secret recording of Carol and Therese (which presumably is meant to suggest FBI spying), there is virtually no other indication of the concrete character of the times. In the end, the décor, costumes and settings are little more than a backdrop for an affair that does not follow "a prescribed path," as Haynes puts it.

The notes also claim that "the sexual candor explored in Highsmith's

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words made the book one of the seminal pieces of literature to come out of the era." This sweeping assertion is simply false.

Highsmith was a minor writer of interesting suspense and psychological thrillers, a number of which have been made into films (*Strangers on a Train*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, etc.). A member of the Young Communist League in the late 1930s. she followed the trajectory of many of her intellectual generation, ending up in the camp of existentialist angst.

In the Eisenhower era, saturated with state-sponsored conformism and the supposed glories of the "American way of life," Highsmith's unapologetic amorality had a certain piquancy and subversiveness. Nonetheless, her 1952 book could hardly be called a seminal piece of literature of that era or any other.

To a certain extent, *Carol* is a case of a missed opportunity. One takes Haynes seriously because of his social sensitivity and his orientation toward some of the more intriguing filmmakers of the past, including Michael Curtiz, Douglas Sirk and R.W. Fassbinder. But where is his version of Fassbinder's *Fox and His Friends*, a scathing portrait of the class divisions among gays? And clearly there has been a degeneration since 1973, when the German filmmaker commented: "I'm often irritated about all the talk about women's liberation. The world isn't a case of women against men, but of poor against rich, of repressed against repressors. And there are just as many repressed men as there are repressed women."

The Danish Girl

Tom Hooper's filmography is less than stellar. His 2010 *The King's Speech* is overly and uncritically fascinated with the British royal family in the 1930s, a hotbed of reaction. His *Les Misérables* (2012) is a miserable musical based on the Victor Hugo work. Fortunately, *The Danish Girl* is a cut above this material.

The new movie is based on the 2000 novel of the same title by David Ebershoff about Danish painters Gerda and Einar Wegener. As noted, Einar was one of the first men to undergo a transgender operation.

In Copenhagen in the mid-1920s, Einar (Eddie Redmayne), a well-known landscape artist, is asked by his wife Gerda (Alicia Vikander) to stand in for a female model to complete one of her portraits.

Although the couple have an intense love and—when we first meet them—are trying to have a baby, Einar slowly sheds his identity as a male and assumes the persona of Lili Elbe—first to Gerda's shock and dismay and then with her full support. They move to Paris and Gerda's portraits of "Lili" become the rage.

To please his wife who wants him back as a man, Einar seeks psychiatric help. This process simply proves excruciating and futile. Eventually, it dawns on Gerda that her husband's desire to be Lili is not ephemeral or light-minded. The couple ultimately find a sympathetic physician who is willing to perform the pioneering surgical procedure.

Vikander's energetic performance powers the largely static, but pleasant-looking movie. The initial sequences of the playful newlyweds are sweet (and made sweeter by their adorable dog who features a little too prominently).

Unfortunately, the film somewhat lazily falls back on Redmayne/Lili's coquettishness and semi-seductive facial expressions (captured in numerous close-ups) as a substitute for a more serious exploration of the issues bound up with his transition from man to woman.

Thus, despite some moving moments, *The Danish Girl* largely rests on the surface of things. What should be the most interesting scenes, in which Einar attempts to explain to various doctors what he sees as his effort to "correct a defect in nature," are relatively brief and perfunctory.

De Profundis

As we argued above, the situations in both *Carol* and *The Danish Girl* had the potential to be genuinely illuminating. Every substantive human situation has that potential.

However, to create a truly enlightening work the filmmaker has to align him or herself, and his or her characters, in some conscious fashion to the fundamental problems of the age, even if those are not directly at the center of a given film. There are an infinite number of possible subjects, but, in our day, they have to stand in some insightful relationship to great class, social and revolutionary problems.

The dilemmas treated in these films involve democratic rights, bound up with the oppressive conditions of class society, which can only find a genuinely rational and humane solution with the transition to socialism.

The exclusivity, the narrowness, the focus on self, of both films here is very damaging.

One of the great artists who paid most dearly for his sexual orientation, Oscar Wilde, sentenced to hard labor for his homosexuality in 1895, did not see his terrible plight in a self-pitying or *exclusivist* fashion. His remarkable and lacerating *De Profundis* ["from the depths"], written in prison, is saturated with empathy for all those who suffer, for "oppressed nationalities, factory children, thieves, people in prison, outcasts, those who are dumb under oppression and whose silence is heard only of God."

Wilde treated his situation in *De Profundis* with considerable objectivity. He clearly understood he had ended up "a pariah," not principally because of his sexuality, but as the result of his lifetime of opposition to the political and cultural establishment, including his authoring *The Soul of Man under Socialism* in 1891. He explained, "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age."

Wilde later in the work amended this, "There is not a single wretched man in this wretched place along with me who does not stand in symbolic relation to the very secret of life. For the secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything." In other words, Wilde identified with *all the oppressed*. We need a revival of that spirit today.

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